'Do some living and get yourself a typewriter'

CHARLES BUKOWSKI

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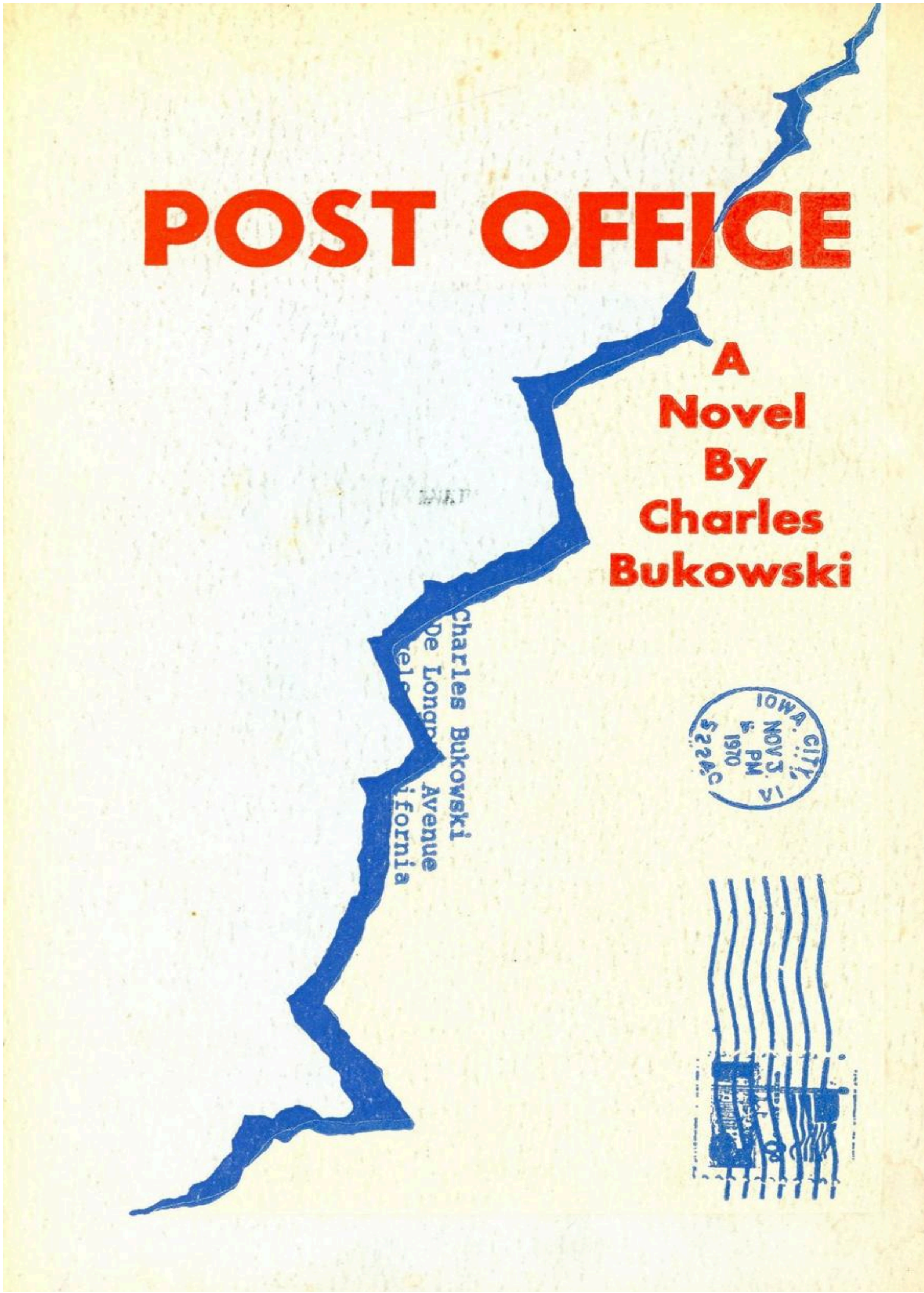
POST OFFICE

A
Novel
By
Charles
Bukowski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POST OFFICE

A NOVEL BY

CHARLES BUKOWSKI

HarperCollins e-books

This is presented as a work of fiction
and dedicated to nobody

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ONE

1

It began as a mistake.

It was Christmas season and I learned from the drunk up the hill, who did the trick every Christmas, that they would hire damned near anybody, and so I went and the next thing I knew I had this leather sack on my back and was hiking around at my leisure. What a job, I thought. Soft! They only gave you a block or two and if you managed to finish, the regular carrier would give you another block to carry, or maybe you'd go back in and the soup would give you another, but you just took your time and shoved those Xmas cards in the slots.

I think it was my second day as a Christmas temp that this big woman came out and walked around with me as I delivered letters. What I mean by big was that her ass was big and her tits were big and that she was big in all the right places. She seemed a bit crazy but I kept looking at her body and I didn't care.

She talked and talked and talked. Then it came out. Her husband was an officer on an island far away and she got lonely, you know, and lived in this little house in back all by herself.

"What little house?" I asked.

She wrote the address on a piece of paper.

"I'm lonely too," I said, "I'll come by and we'll talk tonight."

I was shacked but the shackjob was gone half the time, off somewhere, and I was lonely all right. I was lonely for that big ass standing beside me.

"All right," she said, "see you tonight."

She was a good one all right, she was a good lay but like all lays after the third or fourth night I began to lose interest and didn't go back.

But I couldn’t help thinking, god, all these mailmen do is drop in their letters and get laid. This is the job for me, oh yes yes yes.

2

So I took the exam, passed it, took the physical, passed it, and there I was—a substitute mail carrier. It began easy. I was sent to West Avon Station and it was just like Christmas except I didn't get laid. Every day I expected to get laid but I didn't. But the soup was easy and I strolled around doing a block here and there. I didn't even have a uniform, just a cap. I wore my regular clothes. The way my shackjob Betty and I drank there was hardly money for clothes.

Then I was transferred to Oakford Station.

The soup was a bullneck named Jonstone. Help was needed there and I understood why. Jonstone liked to wear dark-red shirts—that meant danger and blood. There were seven subs—Tom Moto, Nick Pelligrini, Herman Stratford, Rosey Anderson, Bobby Hansen, Harold Wiley and me, Henry Chinaski. Reporting time was 5 a.m. and I was the only drunk there. I always drank until past midnight, and there we'd sit, at 5 a.m., waiting to get on the clock, waiting for some regular to call in sick. The regulars usually called in sick when it rained or during a heatwave or the day after a holiday when the mail load was doubled.

There were 40 or 50 different routes, maybe more, each case was different, you were never able to learn any of them, you had to get your mail up and ready before 8 a.m. for the truck dispatches, and Jonstone would take no excuses. The subs routed their magazines on corners, went without lunch, and died in the streets. Jonstone would have us start casing the routes 30 minutes late—spinning in his chair in his red shirt—"Chinaski take route 539!" We'd start a half hour short but were still expected to get the mail up and out and be back on time. And once or twice a week, already beaten, fagged and fucked we had to make the night pickups, and the schedule on the board was impossible—the truck wouldn't go that fast. You had to skip four or five boxes on the first run and the next time around they were stacked with mail and you stank, you ran with sweat jamming it into the sacks. I got laid all right. Jonstone saw to that.

3

The subs themselves made Jonstone possible by obeying his impossible orders. I couldn't see how a man of such obvious cruelty could be allowed to have his position. The regulars didn't care, the union man was worthless, so I filled out a thirty page report on one of my days off, mailed one copy to Jonstone and took the other down to the Federal Building. The clerk told me to wait. I waited and waited and waited. I waited an hour and thirty minutes, then was taken in to see a little grey-haired man with eyes like cigarette ash. He didn't even ask me to sit down. He began screaming at me as I entered the door.

"You're a wise son of a bitch, aren't you?"

"I'd rather you didn't curse me, sir!"

"Wise son of a bitch, you're one of those sons of bitches with a vocabulary and you like to lay it around!"

He waved my papers at me. And screamed: "MR. JONSTONE IS A FINE MAN!"

"Don't be silly. He's an obvious sadist," I said.

"How long have you been in the Post Office?"

"Three weeks."

"'MR. JONSTONE HAS BEEN WITH THE POST OFFICE FOR 30 YEARS!"

"What does *that* have to do with it?"

"I said, MR. JONSTONE IS A FINE MAN!"

I believe the poor fellow actually wanted to kill me. He and Jonstone must have slept together.

"All right," I said, "Jonstone is a fine man. Forget the whole fucking thing." Then I walked out and took the next day off. Without pay, of course.

4

When Jonstone saw me the next 5 a.m. he spun in his swivel and his face and his shirt were the same color. But he said nothing. I didn't care. I had been up to 2 a.m. drinking and screwing with Betty. I leaned back and closed my eyes.

At 7 a.m. Jonstone swiveled again. All the other subs had been assigned jobs or been sent to other stations that needed help.

"That's all, Chinaski. Nothing for you today."

He watched my face. Hell, I didn't care. All I wanted to do was to go to bed and get some sleep.

"O.K., Stone," I said. Among the carriers he was known as "The Stone," but I was the only one who addressed him that way.

I walked out, the old car started and soon I was back in bed with Betty.

"Oh, Hank! How nice!"

"Damn right, baby!" I pushed up against her warm tail and was asleep in 45 seconds.

5

But the next morning it was the same thing: “That’s all, Chinaski. Nothing for you today.”

It went on for a week. I sat there each morning from 5 a.m. to 7 a.m. and didn’t get paid. My name was even taken off the night collection run.

Then Bobby Hansen, one of the older subs—in length of service—told me, “He did that to me once. He tried to starve me.”

“I don’t care. I’m not kissing his ass. I’ll quit or starve, anything.”

“You don’t have to. Report to Prell Station each night. Tell the soup you aren’t getting any work and you can sit in as a special delivery sub.”

“I can do that? No rules against it?”

“I got a paycheck every two weeks.”

“Thanks, Bobby.”

6

I forget the beginning time. Six or 7 p.m. Something like that.

All you did was sit with a handful of letters, take a streetmap and figure your run. It was easy. All the drivers took much more time than was needed to figure their runs and I played right along with them. I left when everybody left and came back when everybody came back.

Then you made another run. There was time to sit around in coffee shops, read newspapers, feel decent. You even had time for lunch. Whenever I wanted a day off, I took one. On one of the routes there was this big young gal who got a special every night. She was a manufacturer of sexy dresses and nightgowns and *wore* them. You'd run up her steep stairway about 11 p.m., ring the bell and give her the special. She'd let out a bit of a gasp, like, "OOOOOOOOOOOOOOhhhhhhhhHHHH!" and she'd stand close, very, and she wouldn't let you leave while she read it, and then she'd say, "OOOOOoooh, goodnight, thank YOU!"

"Yes, ma'am," you'd say, trotting off with a dick like a bull's.

But it was not to last. It came in the mail after about a week and a half of freedom.

> "Dear Mr. Chinaski:
>
> You are to report to Oakford Station immediately. Refusal to do so will result in possible disciplinary action or dismissal.
>
> A. E. Jonstone, Supt., Oakford Station."

I was back on the cross again.

7

“Chinaski! Take route 539!”

The toughest in the station. Apartment houses with boxes that had scrubbed-out names or no names at all, under tiny lightbulbs in dark halls. Old ladies standing in halls, up and down the streets, asking the same question as if they were one person with one voice:

“Mailman, you got any mail for me?”

And you felt like screaming, “Lady, how the *hell* do I know who *you* are or I am or anybody is?”

The sweat dripping, the hangover, the impossibility of the schedule, and Jonstone back there in his red shirt, knowing it, enjoying it, pretending he was doing it to keep costs down. But everybody knew why he was doing it. Oh, what a fine man he was!

The people. The people. And the dogs.

Let me tell you about the dogs. It was one of those 100 degree days and I was running along, sweating, sick, delirious, hungover. I stopped at a small apartment house with the box downstairs along the front pavement. I popped it open with my key. There wasn’t a sound. Then I felt something jamming its way into my crotch. It moved way up there. I looked around and there was a German Shepherd, full-grown, with his nose halfway up my ass. With one snap of his jaws he could rip off my balls. I decided that those people were not going to get their mail that day, and maybe never get any mail again. Man, I mean he worked that nose in there. SNUFF! SNUFF! SNUFF!

I put the mail back into the leather pouch, and then very slowly, very, I took a half step forward. The nose followed. I took another half step with the other foot. The nose followed. Then I took a slow, very slow full step. Then another. Then stood still. The nose was out. And he just stood there looking at me. Maybe he'd never smelled anything like it and didn't quite know what to do.

I walked quietly away.

8

There was another German Shepherd. It was hot summer and he came BOUNDING out of a back yard and then LEAPED through the air. His teeth snapped, just missing my jugular vein.

“OH JESUS!” I hollered, “OH JESUS CHRIST! MURDER! MURDER! HELP! MURDER!”

The beast turned and leaped again. I socked his head good in mid-air with the mail sack, letters and magazines flying out. He was ready to leap again when two guys, the owners, came out and grabbed him. Then, as he watched and growled, I reached down and picked up the letters and magazines that I would have to re-route on the front porch of the next house.

“You sons of bitches are crazy,” I told the two guys, “that dog’s a killer. Get rid of him or keep him off the street!”

I would have fought them both but there was that dog growling and lunging between them. I went over to the next porch and re-routed my mail on hands and knees.

As usual, I didn’t have time for lunch, but I was still 40 minutes late getting in.

The Stone looked at his watch. “You’re 40 minutes late.”

“You never arrived,” I told him.

“That’s a write-up.”

“Sure it is, Stone.”

He already had the proper form in the typer and was at it. As I sat casing up the mail and doing the go-backs he walked up and threw the form in front of me. I was tired of reading his write-ups and knew from my trip downtown that any protest was useless. Without looking I threw it into the wastebasket.

9

Every route had its traps and only the regular carriers knew of them. Each day it was another god damned thing, and you were always ready for a rape, murder, dogs, or insanity of some sort. The regulars wouldn't tell you their little secrets. That was the only advantage they had—except knowing their case by heart. It was gung ho for a new man, especially one who drank all night, went to bed at 2 a.m., rose at 4:30 a.m. after screwing and singing all night long, and, almost, getting away with it.

One day I was out on the street and the route was going well, though it was a new one, and I thought, Jesus Christ, maybe for the first time in two years I'll be able to eat lunch.

I had a terrible hangover, but still all went well until I came to this handful of mail addressed to a church. The address had no street number, just the name of the church, and the boulevard it faced. I walked, hungover, up the steps. I couldn't find a mailbox in there and no people in there. Some candles burning. Little bowls to dip your fingers in. And the empty pulpit looking at me, and all the statues, pale red and blue and yellow, the transoms shut, a stinking hot morning.

Oh Jesus Christ, I thought. And walked out.

I went around to the side of the church and found a stairway going down. I went in through an open door. Do you know what I saw? A row of toilets. And showers. But it was dark. All the lights were out. How in hell can they expect a man to find a mailbox in the dark? Then I saw the light switch. I threw the thing and the lights in the church went on, inside and out. I walked into the next room and there were priests' robes spread out on a table. There was a bottle of wine.

For Christ's sake, I thought, who in hell but me would ever get caught in a scene like this?

I picked up the bottle of wine, had a good drag, left the letters on the robes, and walked back to the showers and toilets. I turned off the lights and took a shit in the dark and smoked a cigarette. I thought about taking a shower but I could see the headlines: MAILMAN CAUGHT DRINKING THE BLOOD OF GOD AND TAKING A SHOWER, NAKED, IN ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH.

So, finally, I didn't have time for lunch and when I got in Jonstone wrote me up for being 23 minutes off schedule.

I found out later that mail for the church was delivered to the parish house around the corner. But now, of course, I'll know where to shit and shower when I'm down and out.

10

The rainy season began. Most of the money went for drink so my shoes had holes in the soles and my raincoat was torn and old. In any steady downpour I got quite wet, and I mean wet—down to soaked and soggy shorts and stockings. The regular carriers called in sick, they called in sick from stations all over the city, so there was work every day at Oakford Station, at all the stations. Even the subs were calling in sick. I didn't call in sick because I was too tired to think properly. This particular morning I was sent to Wently Station. It was one of those five-day storms where the rain comes down in one continuous wall of water and the whole city gives up, everything gives up, the sewers can't swallow the water fast enough, the water comes up over the curbings, and in some sections, up on the lawn and into the houses.

I was sent off to Wently Station.

"They said they need a good man," the Stone called after me as I stepped out into a sheet of water.

The door closed. If the old car started, and it did, I was off to Wently. But it didn't matter—if the car didn't run, they threw you on a bus. My feet were already wet.

The Wently soup stood me in front of this case. It was already stuffed and I began stuffing more mail in with the help of another sub. I'd never seen such a case! It was a rotten joke of some sort. I counted 12 tie-outs on the case. That case must have covered half the city. I had yet to learn that the route was all steep hills. Whoever had conceived it was a madman.

We got it up and out and just as I was about to leave the soup walked over and said, "I can't give you any help on this."

"That's all right," I said.

All right, hell. It wasn't until later that I found out he was Jonstone's best buddy.

The route started at the station. The first of 12 swings. I stepped into a sheet of water and worked my way downhill. It was the poor part of town—small houses and Courts with mailboxes full of spiders, mailboxes hanging by one nail, old women inside rolling cigarettes and chewing tobacco and humming to their canaries and watching you, an idiot lost in the rain.

When your shorts get wet they slip down, down down they slip, down around the cheeks of your ass, a wet rim of a thing held up by the crotch of your pants. The rain ran the ink on some of the letters; a cigarette wouldn't stay lit. You had to keep reaching into the pouch for magazines. It was the first swing and I was already tired. My shoes were caked with mud and felt like boots. Every now and then I'd hit a slippery spot and almost go down.

A door opened and an old woman asked the question heard a hundred times a day:

"Where's the *regular* man, today?"

"Lady, PLEASE, how would I know? How in the hell would I know? I'm here and he's someplace else!"

"Oh, you *are* a *gooney* fellow!"

"A gooney fellow?"

"Yes."

I laughed and put a fat water-soaked letter in her hand, then went on to the next. Maybe uphill will be better, I thought.

Another Old Nelly, meaning to be nice, asked me, "Wouldn't you like to come in and have a cup of tea and dry off?"

"Lady, don't you realize we don't even have time to pull up our shorts?"

"Pull up your shorts?"

"YES, PULL UP OUR SHORTS!" I screamed at her and walked off into the wall of water.

I finished the first swing. It took about an hour. Eleven more swings, that's eleven more hours. Impossible, I thought. They must have hung the roughest one on me first.

Uphill was worse because you had to pull your own weight.

Noon came and went. Without lunch. I was on the fourth or fifth swing. Even on a dry day the route would have been impossible. This way it was so impossible you couldn't even think about it.

Finally I was so wet I thought I was drowning. I found a front porch that only leaked a little and stood there and managed to light a cigarette. I had about three quiet puffs when I heard a little old lady's voice behind me:

"Mailman! Mailman!"

"Yes, ma'am?" I asked.

"YOUR MAIL IS GETTING WET!"

I looked down at my pouch and sure enough, I had left the leather flap open. A drop or two had fallen in from a hole in the porch roof.

I walked off. That does it, I thought, only an idiot would go through what I am going through. I am going to find a telephone and tell them to come get their mail and jam their job. Jonstone wins.

The moment I decided to quit, I felt much better. Through the rain I saw a building at the bottom of the hill that looked like it might have a telephone in it. I was halfway up the hill. When I got down I saw it was a small cafe. There was a heater going. Well, shit, I thought, I might as well get dry. I took off my raincoat and my cap, threw the mailpouch on the floor and ordered a cup of coffee.

It was very black coffee. Remade from old coffeegrounds. The worst coffee I had ever tasted, but it was hot. I drank three cups and sat there an hour, until I was completely dry. Then I looked out: it had stopped raining! I went out and walked up the hill and began delivering mail again. I took my time and finished the route. On the 12th swing I was walking in twilight. By the time I returned to the station it was night.

The carrier's entrance was locked.

I beat on the tin door.

A little warm clerk appeared and opened the door.

"What the hell took you so long?" he screamed at me.

I walked over to the case and threw down the wet pouch full of go-backs, miscased mail and pickup mail. Then I took off my key and flipped it against the case. You were supposed to sign in and out for your key. I didn't bother. He was standing there.

I looked at him.

"Kid, if you say one more word to me, if you so much as sneeze, so help me God, I am going to kill you!"

The kid didn't say anything. I punched out.

The next morning I kept waiting for Jonstone to turn and say something. He acted as if nothing had happened. The rain stopped and all the regulars were no longer sick. The Stone sent three subs home without pay, one of them me. I almost loved him then.

I went on in and got up against Betty's warm ass.

11

But then it began raining again. The Stone had me out on a thing called Sunday Collection, and if you're thinking of church, forget it. You picked up a truck at West Garage and a clipboard. The clipboard told you what streets, what time you were to be there, and how to get to the next pickup box. Like 2:32 p.m., Beecher and Avalon, L3 R2 (which meant left three blocks, right two) 2:35 p.m., and you wondered how you could pick up one box, then drive five blocks in three minutes and be finished cleaning out another box. Sometimes it took you over three minutes to clean out a Sunday box. And the boards weren't accurate. Sometimes they counted an alley as a street and sometimes they counted a street as an alley. You never knew where you were.

It was one of those continuous rains, not hard, but it *never* stopped. The territory I was driving was new to me but at least it was light enough to read the clipboard. But as it got darker it was harder to read (by the dashboard light) or locate the pickup boxes. Also the water was rising in the streets, and several times I had stepped into water up to my ankles.

Then the dashboard light went out. I couldn't read the clipboard. I had no idea where I was. Without the clipboard I was like a man lost in the desert. But the luck wasn't all bad—yet. I had two boxes of matches and before I made for each new pickup box, I would light a match, memorize the directions and drive on. For once, I had outwitted Adversity, that Jonstone up there in the sky, looking down, watching me.

Then I took a corner, leaped out to unload the box and when I got back the clipboard was GONE!

Jonstone in the Sky, have Mercy! I was lost in the dark and the rain. *Was* I some kind of idiot, actually? Did I make things happen to myself? It was possible. It was possible that I was subnormal, that I was lucky just to be alive.

The clipboard had been wired to the dashboard. I figured it must have flown out of the truck on the last sharp turn. I got out of the truck with my pants rolled up around my knees and started wading through a foot of water. It was dark. I'd never find the god damned thing! I walked along, lighting matches—but nothing, nothing. It had floated away. As I reached the corner I had sense enough to notice which way the current was moving and follow it. I saw an object floating along, lit a match, and there it WAS! The clipboard. *Impossible!* I could have kissed the thing. I waded back to the truck, got in, rolled my pantlegs down and really *wired* that board to the dash. Of course, I was way behind schedule by then but at least I'd found their dirty clipboard. I wasn't lost in the backstreets of Nowhere. I wouldn't have to ring a doorbell and ask somebody the way back to the post office garage.

I could hear some fucker snarling from his warm frontroom: "Well, well. You're a post office employee, *aren't* you? Don't you know the way back to your own garage?"

So I drove along, lighting matches, leaping into whirlpools of water and emptying collection boxes. I was tired and wet and hungover, but I was usually that way and I waded through the weariness like I did the water. I kept thinking of a hot bath, Betty's fine legs, and—something to keep me going—a picture of myself in an easychair, drink in hand, the dog walking up, me patting his head.

But that was a long way off. The stops on the clipboard seemed endless and when I reached the bottom it said, "Over" and I flipped the board and sure enough, there on the backside was *another* list of stops.

With the last match I made the last stop, deposited my mail at the station indicated, and it was a *load*, and then drove back toward the West Garage. It was in the west end of town and in the west the land was very flat, the drainage system couldn't handle the water and anytime it rained any length of time at all, they had what was called a “flood.” The description was accurate.

Driving on in, the water rose higher and higher. I noticed stalled and abandoned cars all around. Too bad. All I wanted was to get in that chair with that glass of scotch in my hand and watch Betty’s ass wobble around the room. Then at a signal I met Tom Moto, one of the other Jonstone subs.

“Which way you going in?” Moto asked.

“The shortest distance between two points, I was taught, is a straight line,” I answered him.

“You better not,” he told me. “I know that area. It’s an ocean through there.”

“Bullshit,” I said, “all it takes is a little guts. Got a match?”

I lit up and left him at the signal. Betty, baby, I’m coming! Yeah.

The water got higher and higher but mail trucks are built high off the ground. I took the shortcut through the residential neighborhood, full speed, and water flew up all around me. It continued to rain, hard. There weren’t any cars around. I was the only moving object.

Betty baby. Yeah.

Some guy standing on his front porch laughed at me and yelled, “THE MAIL MUST GO THROUGH!”

I cursed him and gave him the finger.

I noticed that the water was rising above the floorboards, whirling around my shoes, but I kept driving. Only three blocks to go!

Then the truck stopped.

Oh. Oh. Shit.

I sat there and tried to kick it over. It started once, then stalled. Then it wouldn’t respond. I sat there looking at the water. It must have been two feet deep. What was I supposed to do? Sit there until they sent a rescue squad?

What did the Postal Manual say? Where *was* it? I had never known anybody who had seen one. Balls.

I locked the truck, put the ignition keys in my pocket and stepped into the water—nearly up to my waist—and began wading toward West Garage. It was still raining. Suddenly the water rose another three or four inches. I had been walking across a lawn and had stepped off the curbing. The truck was parked on somebody's front lawn.

For a moment I thought that swimming might be faster, then I thought, no, that would look ridiculous. I made it to the garage and walked up to the dispatcher. There I was, wet as wet could get and he looked at me.

I threw him the truck keys and the ignition keys.

Then I wrote on a piece of paper: 3435 Mountview Place.

"Your truck's at this address. Go get it."

"You mean you left it out there?"

"I mean I left it out there."

I walked over, punched out, then stripped to my shorts and stood in front of a heater. I hung my clothes over the heater. Then I looked across the room and there by another heater stood Tom Moto in *his* shorts.

We both laughed.

"It's hell, isn't it?" he asked.

"Unbelievable."

"Do you think The Stone planned it?"

"Hell yes! He even made it rain!"

"Did you get stalled out there?"

"Sure," I said.

"I did too."

"Listen, baby," I said, "my car is 12 years old. You've got a new one. I'm sure I'm stalled out there. How about a push to get me started?"

"O.K."

We got dressed and went out. Moto had bought a new model car about three weeks before. I waited for his engine to start. Not a sound. Oh Christ, I thought.

The rain was up to the floorboards.

Moto got out.

"No good. It's dead."

I tried mine without any hope. There was some action from the battery, some spark, though feeble. I pumped the gas, hit it again. It started up. I really let it roar. VICTORY! I warmed it good. Then I backed up and began to push Moto's new car. I pushed him for a mile. The thing wouldn't even fart. I pushed him into a garage, left him there, and picking the highland and the drier streets, made it back to Betty's ass.

12

The Stone's favorite carrier was Matthew Battles. Battles never came in with a wrinkled shirt on. In fact, everything he wore was new, looked new. The shoes, the shirts, the pants, the cap. His shoes really shined and none of his clothing appeared to have ever been laundered even once. Once a shirt or a pair of pants became the least bit soiled he threw them away.

The Stone often said to us as Matthew walked by: "Now, *there* goes a carrier!"

And The Stone meant it. His eyes damn near shimmered with love.

And Matthew would stand at his case, erect and clean, scrubbed and well-slept, shoes gleaming victoriously, and he would fan those letters into the case with joy. "You're a real carrier, Matthew!"

"Thank you, Mr. Jonstone!"

One 5 a.m. I walked in and sat down to wait behind The Stone. He looked a bit slumped under that red shirt.

Moto was next to me. He told me: "They picked up Matthew yesterday."

"Picked him up?"

"Yeah, for stealing from the mails. He'd been opening letters for the Nekalayla Temple and taking money out. After 15 years on the job."

"How'd they get him, how'd they find out?"

"The old ladies. The old ladies had been sending in letters to Nekalayla filled with money and they weren't getting any thank-you notes or response. Nekalayla told the P.O. and the P.O. put the Eye on Matthew. They found him opening letters down at the soak-box, taking money out."

"No shit?"

“No shit. They caught him in cold daylight.” I leaned back.

Nekalayla had built this large temple and painted it a sickening green, I guess it reminded him of money, and he had an office staff of 30 or 40 people who did nothing but open envelopes, take out checks and money, record the amount, the sender, date received and so on. Others were busy mailing out books and pamphlets written by Nekalayla, and his photo was on the wall, a large one of N. in priestly robes and beard, and a painting of N., very large too, looked over the office, watching.

Nekalayla claimed he had once been walking through the desert when he met Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ told him everything. They sat on a rock together and J.C. laid it on him. Now he was passing the secrets on to those who could afford it. He also held a service every Sunday. His help, who were also his followers, rang in and out on timeclocks.

Imagine Matthew Battles trying to outwit Nekalayla who had met Christ in the desert!

“Has anybody said anything to The Stone?” I asked. “Are you *kidding?”*

We sat an hour or so. A sub was assigned to Matthew’s case. The other subs were given other jobs. I sat alone behind The Stone. Then I got up and walked to his desk.

“Mr. Jonstone?”

“Yes, Chinaski?”

“Where’s Matthew today? Sick?”

The Stone’s head dropped. He looked at the paper in his hand and pretended to continue reading it. I walked back and sat down.

At 7 a.m. The Stone turned:

“There’s nothing for you today, Chinaski.”

I stood up and walked to the doorway. I stood in the doorway. “Good morning, Mr. Jonstone. Have a good day.”

He didn’t answer. I walked down to the liquor store and bought a half pint of Grand Dad for my breakfast.

13

The voices of the people were the same, no matter where you carried the mail you heard the same things over and over again.

"You're late, aren't you?"

"Where's the regular carrier?"

"Hello, Uncle Sam!"

"Mailman! Mailman! This doesn't go here!"

The streets were full of insane and dull people. Most of them lived in nice houses and didn't seem to work, and you wondered how they did it. There was one guy who wouldn't let you put the mail in his box. He'd stand in the driveway and watch you coming for two or three blocks and he'd stand there and hold his hand out.

I asked some of the others who had carried the route: "What's wrong with that guy who stands there and holds his hand out?"

"What guy who stands there and holds his hand out?" they asked.

They all had the same voice too.

One day when I had the route, the man-who-holds-his-hand-out was a half a block up the street. He was talking to a neighbor, looked back at me more than a block away and knew he had time to walk back and meet me. When he turned his back to me, I began running. I don't believe I ever delivered mail that fast, all stride and motion, never stopping or pausing, I was going to kill him. I had the letter half in the slot of his box when he turned and saw me.

"OH NO NO NO!" he screamed, "DON'T PUT IT IN THE BOX!"

He ran down the street toward me. All I saw was the blur of his feet. He must have run a hundred yards in 9.2.

I put the letter in his hand. I watched him open it, walk across the porch, open the door and go into his house. What it meant somebody else will have to tell me.

14

Again I was on a new route. The Stone always put me on hard routes, but now and then, due to the circumstances of things, he was forced to place me on one less murderous. Route 511 was peeling off quite nicely, and there I was thinking about *lunch* again, the lunch that never came.

It was an average residential neighborhood. No apartment houses. Just house after house with well-kept lawns. But it was a *new* route and I walked along wondering where the trap was. Even the weather was nice.

By god, I thought, I'm going to make it! Lunch, and back in on schedule! Life, at last, was bearable.

These people didn't even own dogs. Nobody stood outside waiting for their mail. I hadn't heard a human voice in hours. Perhaps I had reached my postal maturity, whatever that was. I strolled along, efficient, almost dedicated.

I remembered one of the older carriers pointing to his heart and telling me, "Chinaski, someday it will get to you, it will get you right *here!*"

"Heart attack?"

"Dedication to service. You'll see. You'll be proud of it."

"Balls!"

But the man had been sincere. I thought about him as I walked along. Then I had a registered letter with return attached. I walked up and rang the doorbell. A little window opened in the door. I couldn't see the face. "Registered letter!"

"Stand back!" said a woman's voice. "Stand back so I can see your face!"

Well, there it was, I thought, another nut.

"Look lady, you don't h*ave to* see my face. I'll just leave this slip in the mailbox and you can pick your letter up at the station.

Bring proper identification.”

I put the slip in the mailbox and began to walk off the porch.

The door opened and she ran out. She had on one of those see-through negligees and no brassiere. Just dark blue panties. Her hair was uncombed and stuck out as if it were trying to run away from her. There seemed to be some type of cream on her face, most of it under the eyes. The skin on her body was white as if it never saw sunlight and her face had an unhealthy look. Her mouth hung open. She had on a touch of lipstick, and she was *built* all the way …

I caught all this as she rushed at me. I was sliding the registered letter back into the pouch.

She screamed, “Give me my letter!”

I said, “Lady, you’ll have to …”

She grabbed the letter and ran to the door, opened it and ran in.

God damn! You couldn’t come back without either the registered letter or a signature! You even had to sign in and out with the things.

“HEY!”

I went after her and jammed my foot into the door just in time.

“HEY. GOD DAMN YOU!”

“Go away! Go away! You are an evil man!”

“Look, lady! Try to understand! You’ve got to sign for that letter! I can’t let you have it that way! You are robbing the United States mails! “

“Go away, evil man!

I put all my weight against the door and pushed into the room. It was dark in there. All the shades were down. All the shades in the house were down.

“YOU HAVE NO RIGHT IN MY HOUSE! GET OUT!”

“And you have no right to rob the mails! Either give me the letter back or sign for it. Then I’ll leave.”

“All right! All right! I’ll sign.”

I showed her where to sign and gave her a pen. I looked at her breasts and the rest of her and I thought, what a shame she's crazy, what a shame, what a shame.

She handed back the pen and her signature—it was just scrawled. She opened the letter, began to read it as I turned to leave.

Then she was in front of the door, arms spread across. The letter was on the floor.

"Evil evil evil man! You came here to rape me!"

"Look lady, let me by."

"THERE IS EVIL WRITTEN ALL OVER YOUR FACE!"

"Don't you think I know that? Now let me out of here!"

With one hand I tried to push her aside. She clawed one side of my face, good. I dropped my bag, my cap fell off, and as I held a handkerchief to the blood she came up and raked the other side.

"YOU CUNT! WHAT THE HELL'S WRONG WITH YOU!"

"See there? See there? You're evil!"

She was right up against me. I grabbed her by the ass and got my mouth on hers. Those breasts were against me, she was all up against me. She pulled her head back, away from me—"Rapist! Rapist! Evil rapist!"

I reached down with my mouth, got one of her tits, then switched to the other.

"Rape! Rape! I'm being raped!"

She was right. I got her pants down, unzipped my fly, got it in, then walked her backwards to the couch. We fell down on top of it.

She lifted her legs high.

"RAPE!" she screamed.

I finished her off, zipped my fly, picked up my mail pouch and walked out leaving her staring quietly at the ceiling …

I missed lunch but still couldn't make the schedule.

"You're 15 minutes late," said The Stone. I didn't say anything.

The Stone looked at me. "God o mighty, what happened to your face?" he asked.

“What happened to yours?” I asked him.

“Whadda you mean?”

“Forget it.”

15

I was hungover again, another heat spell was on—a week of 100-degree days. The drinking went on each night, and in the early mornings and days there was The Stone and the impossibility of everything.

Some of the boys wore African sun helmets and shades, but me, I was about the same, rain or shine—ragged clothing, and the shoes so old that the nails were always driving into my feet. I put pieces of cardboard in the shoes. But it only helped temporarily—soon the nails would be eating into my heels again.

The whiskey and beer ran out of me, fountained from the armpits, and I drove along with this load on my back like a cross, pulling out magazines, delivering thousands of letters, staggering, welded to the side of the sun.

Some woman screamed at me:

"MAILMAN! MAILMAN! THIS DOESN'T GO HERE!"

I looked. She was a block back down the hill and I was already behind schedule.

"Look, lady, put the letter outside your mailbox! We'll pick it up tomorrow!"

"NO! NO! I WANT YOU TO TAKE IT NOW!"

She waved the thing around in the sky.

"Lady!"

"COME GET IT! IT DOESN'T BELONG HERE!" Oh my god.

I dropped the sack. Then I took my cap and threw it on the grass. It rolled out into the street. I left it and walked down toward the woman. One half block.

I walked down and snatched the thing from her hand, turned, walked back.

It was an advertisement! Third-class mail. Something about a half off clothing sale.

I picked my cap up out of the street, put it on my head. Put the sack back onto the left side of my spine, started, out again. 100 degrees.

I walked past one house and a woman ran out after me.

“Mailman! Mailman! Don’t you have a letter for me?”

“Lady, if I didn’t put one in your box, that means you don’t have any mail.”

“But I know you have a letter for me!”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because my sister phoned and said she was going to write me.”

“Lady, I don’t have a letter for you.”

“I know you have! I know you have! I know it’s there!” She started to reach for a handful of letters. “DON’T TOUCH THE UNITED STATES MAILS, LADY! THERE’S NOTHING FOR YOU TODAY!” I turned and walked off. “I KNOW YOU HAVE MY LETTER!” Another woman stood on her porch. “You’re late today.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Where’s the regular man today?”

“He’s dying of cancer.”

“Dying of cancer? Harold is dying of cancer?”

“That’s right,” I said. I handed her mail to her.

“BILLS! BILLS! BILLS!” she screamed. “IS THAT ALL YOU CAN BRING ME? THESE BILLS?”

“Yes, ma’am, that’s all I can bring you.” I turned and walked on.

It wasn’t my fault that they used telephones and gas and light and bought all their things on credit. Yet when I brought them their bills they screamed at me—as if I had asked them to have a phone installed, or a $350 t.v. set sent over with no money down.

The next stop was a small two storey dwelling, fairly new, with 10 or 12 units. The lock box was in the front, under a porch roof. At last, a bit of shade. I put the key in the box and opened it.

"HELLO UNCLE SAM! HOW ARE YOU TODAY?"

He was loud. I hadn't expected that man's voice behind me. He had *screamed* at me, and being hungover I was nervous. I jumped in shock. It was too much. I took the key out of the box and turned. All I could see was a screen door. Somebody was back in there. Air-conditioned and invisible.

"God damn you!" I said, "don't call me Uncle Sam! I'm *not* Uncle Sam!"

"Oh you're one of those *wise* guys, eh? For two cents I'd come out and whip your ass!"

I took my pouch and slammed it to the ground. Magazines and letters flew everywhere. I would have to reroute the whole swing. I took off my cap, and smashed it to the cement.

"COME OUT OF THERE, YOU SON OF A BITCH! OH, GOD

0 MIGHTY, I BEG YOU! COME OUT OF THERE! COME OUT, COME OUT OF THERE!"

I was ready to murder him.

Nobody came out. There wasn't a sound. I looked at the screen door. Nothing. It was as if the apartment were empty. For a moment I thought of going on in. Then I turned, got down on my knees and began rerouting the letters and magazines. It's a job without a case. Twenty minutes later I had the mail up. I stuck some letters in the lock box, dropped the magazines on the porch, locked the box, turned, looked at the screen door again. Still not a sound.

I finished the route, walking along, thinking, well, he'll phone and tell Jonstone that I threatened him. When I get in I better be ready for the worst.

I swung the door open and there was The Stone at his desk, reading something.

I stood there, looking down at him, waiting.

The Stone glanced up at me, then down at what he was reading.

I kept standing there, waiting.

The Stone kept reading.

"Well," I finally said, "what about it?"

"What about what?" The Stone looked up. "ABOUT THE PHONE CALL! TELL ME ALL ABOUT THE PHONE CALL! DON'T JUST SIT THERE!"

"What phone call?"

"You didn't get a phone call about me?"

"A phone call? What happened? What have you been doing out there? What did you do?"

"Nothing."

I walked over and checked my stuff in. The guy hadn't phoned in. No grace on his part. He probably thought I would come back if he phoned in. I walked past The Stone on my way back to the case. "What did you *do* out there, Chinaski?"

"Nothing."

My act so confused The Stone that he forgot to tell me I was 30 minutes late or write me up for it.

16

I was casing next to G.G. early one morning. That’s what they called him: G.G. His actual name was George Greene. But for years he was simply called G.G. and after a while he looked like G.G. He had been a carrier since his early twenties and now he was in his late sixties. His voice was gone. He didn’t speak. He croaked. And when he croaked, he didn’t say much. He was neither liked nor disliked. He was just there. His face had wrinkled into strange runs and mounds of unattractive flesh. No light shone from his face. He was just a hard old crony who had done his job: G.G. The eyes looked like dull bits of clay dropped into the eye sockets.

It was best if you didn’t think about him or look at him.

But G.G., having all that seniority had one of the easiest routes, right out on the fringe of the rich district. In fact, you might call it the rich district. Although the houses were old, they were large, most of them two stories high. Wide lawns mowed and kept green by Japanese gardeners. Some movie stars lived there. A famous cartoonist. A best-selling writer. Two former governors. Nobody ever spoke to you in that area. You never saw anybody. The only time you saw anybody was at the beginning of the route where there were less expensive homes, and here the children bothered you. I mean, G.G. was a bachelor. And he had this whistle. At the beginning of his route, he’d stand tall and straight, take out the whistle, a large one, and blow it, spit flying out in all directions. That was to let the children know he was there. He had candy for the children. And they’d come running out and he’d give them candy as he went down the street. Good old G.G.

I’d found out about the candy the first time I got the route. The Stone didn’t like to give me a route that easy but sometimes he couldn't help it. So I walked along and this young boy came out and asked me,

"Hey, where's my candy?"

And I said, "What candy, kid?"

And the kid said, *"My* candy! I want *my* candy!"

"Look, kid," I said, "you must be crazy. Does your mother just let you run around loose?"

The kid looked at me strangely.

But one day G.G. got into trouble. Good old G.G. He met this new little girl in the neighborhood. And gave her some candy. And said, "My, you're a *pretty* little girl! I'd like to have you for my own little girl!"

The mother had been listening at the window and she ran out screaming, accusing G.G. of child molestation. She hadn't known about G.G., so when she saw him give the girl candy and make that statement, it was too much for her.

Good old G.G. Accused of child molestation.

I came in and heard The Stone on the phone, trying to explain to the mother that G.G. was a honorable man. G.G. just sat in front of his case, transfixed.

When The Stone was finished and had hung up, I told him:

"You shouldn't suck up to that woman. She's got a dirty mind. Half the mothers in America, with their precious big pussies and their precious little daughters, half the mothers in America have dirty minds. Tell her to shove it. G.G. can't get his pecker hard, you know that."

The Stone shook his head. "No, the public's dynamite! They're dynamite!"

That's all he could say. I had seen The Stone before-posturing and begging and explaining to every nut who phoned in about anything …

I was casing next to G.G. on route 501, which was not too bad. I had to fight to get the mail up but it was *possible*, and that gave one hope.

Although G.G. knew his case was upsidedown, his hands were slowing. He had simply stuck too many letters in his life—even his sense-deadened body was finally revolting. Several times during the morning I saw him falter. He'd stop and sway, go into a trance, then snap out of it and stick some more letters. I wasn't particularly fond of the man. His life hadn't been a brave one, and he had turned out to be a hunk of shit more or less. But each time he faltered, something tugged at me. It was like a faithful horse who just couldn't go anymore. Or an old car, just giving it up one morning.

The mail was heavy and as I watched G.G. I got death-chills. For the first time in over 40 years he might miss the morning dispatch! For a man as proud of his job and his work as G.G., that could be a tragedy. I had missed plenty of morning dispatches, and had to take the sacks out to the boxes in my car, but my attitude was a bit different.

He faltered again.

God o mighty, I thought, doesn't anybody notice but me?

I looked around, nobody was concerned. They all professed, at one time or another, to be fond of him—"G.G.'s a good guy." But the "good old guy" was sinking and nobody cared. Finally I had less mail in front of me than G.G.

Maybe I can help him get his magazines up, I thought. But a clerk came along and dropped more mail in front of me and I was almost back with G.G. It was going to be close for both of us. I faltered for a moment, then clenched my teeth together, spread my legs, dug in like a guy who had just taken a hard punch, and winged the mass of letters in.

Two minutes before pull-down time, both G.G. and I had gotten our mail up, our mags routed and sacked, our airmail in. We were both going to make it. I had worried for nothing. Then The Stone came up. He carried two bundles of circulars. He gave one bundle to G.G. and the other to me.

"These must be worked in," he said, then walked off. The Stone knew that we couldn't work those circs in and pull-down in time to meet the dispatch. I wearily cut the strings around the circs and started to case them in. G.G. just sat there and stared at his bundle of circs.

Then he put his head down, put his head down in his arms and began to cry softly.

I couldn't believe it.

I looked around.

The other carriers weren't looking at G.G. They were pulling down their letters, strapping them out, talking and laughing with each other.

"Hey," I said a couple of times, "hey!"

But they wouldn't look at G.G.

I walked over to G.G. Touched him on the arm: "G.G.," I said, "what can I do for you?"

He jumped up from his case, ran up the stairway to the men's locker room. I watched him go. Nobody seemed to notice. I stuck a few more letters, then ran up the stairs myself.

There he was, head down in his arms on one of the tables. Only he wasn't quietly crying now. He was sobbing and wailing. His whole body shook in spasms. He wouldn't stop.

I ran down the steps, past all the carriers, and up to The Stone's desk.

"Hey, hey, Stone! Jesus Christ, Stone!"

"What is it?" he asked.

"G.G. has flipped out! Nobody cares! He's upstairs crying! He needs help!"

"Who's manning his route?"

"Who gives a damn? I tell you, he's *sick!* He needs help!"

"I gotta get somebody to man his route!" The Stone got up from his desk, circled around looking at his carriers as if there might be an extra one somewhere.

Then he hustled back to his desk.

"Look, Stone, somebody's got to take that man home. Tell me where he lives and I'll drive him home myself—off the clock. Then I'll carry your damned route."

The Stone looked up:

"Who's manning your case?"

"Oh, God damn the case!"

"GO MAN YOUR CASE!"

Then he was talking to another supervisor on the phone: “Hello, Eddie? Listen, I need a man out here …”

There’d be no candy for the kids that day. I walked back. All the other carriers were gone. I began sticking in the circulars. Over on G.G.’s case was his tie-up of unstuck circs. I was behind schedule again. Without a dispatch. When I came in late that afternoon, The Stone wrote me up.

I never saw G.G. again. Nobody knew what happened to him. Nor did anybody ever mention him again. The “good guy.” The dedicated man. Knifed across the throat over a handful of circs from a local market—with its special: a free box of a brand name laundry soap, with the coupon, and any purchase over $3.

17

After three years I made "regular." That meant holiday pay (subs didn't get paid for holidays) and a 40-hour week with two days off. The Stone was also forced to assign me as relief man to five different routes. That's all I had to carry—five different routes. In time, I would learn the cases well plus the shortcuts and traps on each route. Each day would be easier. I could begin to cultivate that comfortable look.

Somehow, I was not too happy. I was not a man to deliberately seek pain, the job was still difficult enough, but somehow it lacked the old glamour of my sub days—the not-knowing-what-the-hell was going to happen next.

A few of the regulars came around and shook my hand.

"Congratulations," they said.

"Yeh," I said.

Congratulations for what? I hadn't done anything. Now I was a member of the club. I was one of the boys. I could be there for years, eventually bid for my own route. Get Xmas presents from my people. And when I phoned in sick, they would say to some poor bastard sub, "Where's the *regular* man today? You're late. The regular man is never late."

So there I was. Then a bulletin came out that no caps or equipment were to be placed on top of the carrier's case. Most of the boys put their caps up there. It didn't hurt anything and saved a trip to the locker room. Now after three years of putting my cap up there I was ordered not to do so.

Well, I was still coming in hungover and I didn't have things like caps on my mind. So my cap was up there, the day after the order came out.

The Stone came running with his write-up. It said that it was against rules and regulations to have any equipment on top of the case. I put the write-up in my pocket and went on sticking letters. The Stone sat swiveled in his chair, watching me. All the other carriers had put their caps in their lockers. Except me and one other—one Marty. And The Stone had gone up to Marty and said, "Now, Marty, you read the order. Your cap isn't supposed to be on top of the case."

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir. Habit, you know. Sorry." Marty took his cap off the case and ran upstairs to his locker with it.

The next morning I forgot again. The Stone came with his write-up.

It said that it was against rules and regulations to have any equipment on top of the case.

I put the write-up in my pocket and went on sticking letters.

The next morning, as I walked in, I could see The Stone watching me. He was very deliberate about watching me. He was waiting to see what I would do with the cap. I let him wait awhile. Then I took the cap off my head and placed it on top of the case.

The Stone ran up with his write-up.

I didn't read it. I threw it in the wastebasket, left my cap up there and went on sticking mail.

I could hear The Stone at his typewriter. There was anger in the sound of the keys.

I wondered how he managed to learn how to type? I thought.

He came again. Handed me a second write-up. I looked at him.

"I don't have to read it. I know what it says. It says that I didn't read the first write-up."

I threw the second write-up in the wastebasket.

The Stone ran back to his typewriter.

He handed me a third write-up.

"Look," I said, "I know what all these things say. The first write-up was for having my cap on top of the case. The second was for not reading the first. This third one is for not reading the first or second write-ups."

I looked at him, and then dropped the write-up into the wastebasket without reading it.

"Now I can throw these away as fast as you can type them. It can go on for hours and soon one of us is going to begin looking ridiculous. It's up to you."

The Stone went back to his chair and sat down. He didn't type anymore. He just sat looking at me.

I didn't go in the next day. I slept until noon. I didn't phone. Then I went down to the Federal Building. I told them my mission. They put me in front of the desk of a thin old woman. Her hair was grey and she had a very thin neck that suddenly bent in the middle. It pushed her head forward and she looked up over the top of her glasses at me.

"Yes?"

"I want to resign."

"To *resign?"* "Yes, resign."

"And you're a regular carrier?"

"Yes," I said.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk," she went, making this sound with her dry lips.

She gave me the proper papers and I sat there filling them out.

"How long have you been with the post office?"

"Three and one half years."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk," she went, "tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk."

And so there it was. I drove home to Betty and we uncapped the bottle.

Little did I know that in a couple of years I would be back as a clerk and that I would clerk, all hunched-up on a stool, for nearly 12 years.

TWO

1

Meanwhile, things went on. I had a long run of luck at the racetrack. I began to feel confident out there. You went for a certain profit each day, somewhere between fifteen and forty bucks. You didn't ask too much. If you didn't hit early, you bet a little more, enough so that if the horse came in, you had your profit margin. I kept coming back, day after day, winners, giving Betty the thumb-up as I drove in the driveway.

Then Betty got a job as a typist, and when one of those shack-jobs gets a job, you notice the difference right away. We kept drinking each night and she left before I did in the morning, all hungover. Now she'd know what it was like. I got up around 10:30 a.m., had a leisurely cup of coffee and a couple of eggs, played with the dog, flirted with the young wife of a mechanic who lived in the back, got friendly with a stripteaser who lived in the front. I'd be at the track by 1:00 p.m., then back with my profit, and out with the dog at the bus stop to wait for Betty to come home. It was a good life.

Then, one night, Betty, my love, let me have it, over the first drink: "Hank, I can't stand it!"

"You can't stand what, baby?"

"The situation."

"What situation, babe?"

"Me working and you laying around. All the neighbors think I am supporting you."

"Hell, I worked and *you* laid around."

"That's different. You're a man, I'm a woman."

"Oh, I didn't know that. I thought you bitches were always screaming for equal rights?"

"I know what's going on with little butterball in back, walking around in front of you with her tits hanging out …"

"Her *tits* hanging out?"

"Yes, her TITS! Those big white cow-tits!"

"Hmmm … They are big at that."

"There! You see!"

"Now what the hell?"

"I've got friends around here. They see what's going on!"

"Those aren't friends. Those are just mealy-mouthed gossips."

"And that whore up front who poses as a dancer."

"She's a whore?"

"She'll screw anything with a cock."

"You've gone crazy."

"I just don't want all these people thinking I am supporting you. All the neighbors …"

"God damn the neighbors! What do we care what they think? We never did before. Besides, *I'm* paying the rent. *I'm* buying the food! I'm making it at the track. Your money is yours. You never had it so good."

"No, Hank, it's over. I can't stand it!"

I got up and walked over to her.

"Now, come on, baby, you're just a little upset tonight."

I tried to grab her. She pushed me away.

"All right, god damn it!" I said.

I walked back to my chair, finished my drink, had another.

"It's over," she said, "I'm not sleeping with you another night."

"All right. Keep your pussy. It's not that great."

"Do you want to keep the house or do you want to move out?" she asked.

"You keep the house."

"How about the dog?"

"You keep the dog," I said.

"He's going to miss you."

"I'm glad somebody is going to miss me."

I got up, walked to the car and I rented the first place I saw with a sign. I moved in that night.

I had just lost three women and a dog.

2

The next thing I knew, I had a young girl from Texas on my lap. I won't go into details of how I met her. Anyway, there it was. She was 23. I was 36.

She had long blonde hair and was good solid meat. I didn't know, at the time, that she also had plenty of money. She didn't drink but I did. We laughed a lot at first. And went to the racetrack together. She was a looker, and everytime I got back to my seat there would be some jerkoff sliding closer and closer to her. There were dozens of them. They just kept moving closer and closer. Joyce would just sit. I had to handle them all one of two ways. Either take Joyce and move off or tell the guy:

"Look, buddy, this one's taken! Now move off!"

But fighting the wolves and the horses at the same time was too much for me. I kept losing. A pro goes to the track alone. I knew that. But I thought maybe I was exceptional. I found out that I wasn't exceptional at all I could lose my money as fast as anybody.

Then Joyce demanded that we get married.

What the hell? I thought, I'm cooked anyhow.

I drove her to Vegas for a cheap wedding, then drove her right back.

I sold the car for ten dollars and the next thing I knew we were on a bus to Texas and when we landed I had seventy-five cents in my pocket. It was a very small town, the population, I believe, was under 2,000. The town had been picked by experts, in a national article, as the last town in the USA any enemy would attack with an atomic bomb. I could see why.

All this time, without knowing it, I was working my way back toward the post office. That mother.

Joyce had a little house in town and we laid around and screwed and ate. She fed me well, fattened me up and weakened me at the same time. She couldn't get enough. Joyce, my wife, was a nymph.

I took little walks through the town, alone, to get away from her, teethmarks all over my chest, neck and shoulders, and somewhere else that worried me more and was quite painful. She was eating me alive.

I limped through the town and they stared at me, knowing about Joyce, her sex drive, and also that her father and grandfather had more money, land, lakes, hunting preserves than all of them. They pitied and hated me at the same time.

A midget was sent to get me out of bed one morning and he drove me all over, pointing out this and that, Mr.

so and so, Joyce's father owns that, and Mr. so and so, Joyce's grandfather owns that …

We drove all morning. Somebody was trying to scare me. I was bored. I sat in the back seat and the midget thought I was an operator, that I had worked my way into millions. He didn't know it was an accident, and that I was an ex-mail carrier with seventy-five cents in my pocket.

The midget, poor fellow, had a nervous disease and drove very fast, and every so often he'd shake all over and lose control of the car. It went from one side of the road to the other and once scraped along a fence for 100 yards before the midget got control of himself.

"HEY! EASY THERE, BUSTER!" I yelled at him from the back seat.

That was it. They were trying to knock me off. It was obvious. The midget was married to a very beautiful girl. When she was in her teens she got a coke bottle trapped in her pussy and had to go to a doctor to get it out, and, like in all small towns, the word got around about the coke bottle, the poor girl was shunned, and the midget was the only taker. He'd ended up with the best piece of ass in town.

I lit up a cigar Joyce had given me and I told the midget, "That'll be all, buster. Now see that I get back. And drive slowly. I don't want to blow this game now."

I played the operator to please him.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Chinaski. Yes, sir!"

He admired me. He thought I was a son of a bitch.

When I got in, Joyce asked, "Well, did you see everything?"

"I saw enough," I said. Meaning, that they were trying to knock me off. I didn't know if Joyce was in on it or not.

Then she started peeling my clothes off and pushing me toward the bed.

"Now wait a minute, baby! We've already gone twice and it's not even 2 p.m. yet!"

She just giggled and kept on pushing.

3

Her father really hated me. He thought I was after his money. I didn’t want his god damned money. And I didn’t even want his god damned precious daughter.

The only time I ever saw him was when he walked into the bedroom one morning about 10:00. Joyce and I were in bed, resting up. Luckily we had just finished.

I peered at him from under the edge of the cover. Then I couldn’t help myself. I smiled at him and gave him a big wink.

He ran out of the house growling and cursing.

If I could be removed, he’d certainly see to it.

Gramps was cooler. We’d go to his place and I’d drink whiskey with him and listen to his cowboy records. His old lady was simply indifferent. She neither liked nor hated me. She fought with Joyce a lot and I sided with the old lady once or twice. That kind of won her over. But gramps was cool. I think he was in on the conspiracy.

We had been at this cafe and eaten, with everybody fawning over us and staring. There was gramps, grandma, Joyce, and I.

Then we got in the car and drove along.

“Ever seen any buffalo, Hank?” gramps asked me.

“No, Wally, I haven’t.”

I called him “Wally.” Old whiskey buddies. Like hell. “We have them here.”

“I thought they were just about extinct?”

“Oh, no, we got dozens of ‘em.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Show him, Daddy Wally,” said Joyce. Silly bitch. She called him “Daddy Wally.” He wasn’t her daddy. “All right.”

We drove on a way until we came to this empty fenced-in field. The ground sloped and you couldn’t see the other end of the field. It was miles long and wide. There was nothing but short green grass.

"I don't see any buffalo," I said.

"The wind's right, "said Wally. "Just climb in there and walk a ways. You've got to walk a ways to see them."

There was nothing in the field. They thought they were being very funny, conning a city-slicker. I climbed the fence and walked on in.

"Well, where are the buffalo?" I called back.

"They're there. Go on in."

Oh hell, they were going to play the old drive-away joke. Damned farmers. They'd wait until I got in there and then drive off laughing. Well, let them. I could walk back. It'd give me a rest from Joyce.

I walked very quickly into the field, waiting for them to drive off. I didn't hear them leaving. I walked further in, then turned, cupped my hands and yelled back at them: "WELL, WHERE'S THE BUFFALO?"

My answer came from behind me. I could hear their feet on the ground. There were three of them, big ones, just like in the movies, and they were running, they were coming FAST! One had a bit of a lead on the others. There was little doubt who they were headed for.

"Oh shit!" I said.

I turned and began running. That fence looked a long way away. It looked impossible. I couldn't spare the time to look back. That might make the difference. I was flying, wide-eyed. I really moved! But they gained steadily! I could feel the ground shaking around me as they beat up the earth getting right down on me. I could hear them slobbering, I could hear them breathing. With the last of my strength I dug in and leaped the fence. I didn't climb it. I sailed over it. And landed on my back in a ditch with one of those things poking his head over the fence and looking down at me.

In the car, they were all laughing. They thought it was the funniest thing they had ever seen. Joyce was laughing louder than any of them.

The stupid beasts circled, then loped off.

I got out of the ditch and climbed in the car.

“I’ve seen the buffalo,” I said, “now let’s go catch a drink.”

They laughed all the way in. They’d stop and then somebody would start and then they all would start. Wally had to stop the car once. He couldn’t drive anymore. He opened the door and rolled out on the ground and laughed. Even grandma was getting hers, along with Joyce.

Later the story got around in town and there was a bit of swagger missing from my walk. I needed a haircut. I told Joyce.

She said, “Go to a barbershop. “

And I said, “I can’t. It’s the buffalo.”

“Are you afraid of those men in the barbershop?”

“It’s the buffalo,” I said.

Joyce cut my hair.

She did a terrible job.

4

Then Joyce wanted to go back to the city. For all the drawbacks, that little town, haircuts or not, beat city life. It was quiet. We had our own house. Joyce fed me well. Plenty of meat. Rich, good, well-cooked meat. I'll say one thing for that bitch. She could cook. She could cook better than any woman I had ever known. Food is good for the nerves and the spirit. Courage comes from the belly-all else is desperation.

But no, she wanted to go. Granny was always climbing her and she was pissed. Me, I rather enjoyed playing the villain. I had made her cousin, the town bully, back down. It had never been done before. On blue jean day everybody in town was supposed to wear blue jeans or get thrown in the lake. I put on my only suit and necktie and slowly, like Billy the Kid, with all eyes on me, I walked slowly through the town, looking in windows, stopping for cigars. I broke that town in half like a wooden match.

Later, I met the town doctor in the street. I liked him. He was always high on drugs. I was not a drug man, but in case I had to hide from myself for a few days, I knew I could get anything I wanted from him.

"We've got to leave," I told him.

"You ought to stay here," he said, "it's a good life. Plenty of hunting and fishing. The air's good. And no pressure. You own this town," he said.

"I know, doc, but she wears the pants."

5

So gramps wrote Joyce a big check and there we were. We rented a little house up on a hill, and then Joyce got this stupid moralistic thing.

"We both ought to get jobs," Joyce said, "to prove to them that you are not after their money. To prove to them that we are self-sufficient."

"Baby, that's grammar school. Any damn fool can beg up some kind of job; it takes a wise man to make it without working. Out here we call it 'hustling.' I'd like to be a good hustler. "

She didn't want it.

Then I explained that a man couldn't find a job unless he had a car to drive around in. Joyce got on the phone and gramps sent the money on in. Next thing I knew I was sitting in a new Plymouth. She sent me out on the streets dressed in a fine new suit, forty-dollar shoes, and I thought, what the hell, I'll try to stretch it out. Shipping clerk, that's what I was. When you didn't know how to do anything that's what you became—a shipping clerk, receiving clerk, stock boy. I checked two ads, went to two places and both of the places hired me. The first place smelled like work, so I took the second.

So there I was with my gummed tape machine working in an art store. It was easy. There was only an hour or two of work a day. I listened to the radio, built a little office out of plywood, put an old desk in there, the telephone, and I sat around reading the Racing Form. I'd get bored sometimes and walk down the alley to the coffee shop and sit in there, drinking coffee, eating pie and flirting with the waitresses.

The truck drivers would come in:

"Where's Chinaski?"

"He's down at the coffee shop."

They'd come down there, have a coffee, and then we'd walk up the alley and do our bit, take a few cartons off the truck or throw them on. Something about a bill of lading.

They wouldn't fire me. Even the salesmen liked me. They were robbing the boss out the back door but I didn't say anything. That was their little game. It didn't interest me. I wasn't much of a petty thief. I wanted the whole world or nothing.

6

There was death in that place on the hill. I knew it the first day I walked out the screen door and into the backyard. A zinging binging buzzing whining sound came right at me: 10,000 flies rose straight up into the air at once. All the backyards had these flies—there was this tall green grass and they nested in it, they loved it.

Oh Jesus Christ, I thought, and not a spider within five miles!

As I stood there, the 10,000 flies began to come back down out of the sky, settling down in the grass, along the fence, the ground, in my hair, on my arms, everywhere. One of the bolder ones bit me.

I cursed, ran out and bought the biggest fly sprayer you ever saw. I fought them for hours, raging we were, the flies and I, and hours later, coughing and sick from breathing the fly killer, I looked around and there was as many flies as ever. I think for each one I killed they got down in the grass and bred two. I gave it up.

The bedroom had this room-break encircling the bed. There were pots and the pots had geraniums in them. When I went to bed with Joyce the first time and we worked out, I noticed the boards begin to wave and shake.

Then plop.

"Oh oh!" I said.

"What's the matter now?" asked Joyce. "Don't stop! Don't stop!"

"Baby, a pot of geraniums just fell on my ass."

"Don't stop! Go ahead!"

"All right, all right!"

I stoked up again, was going fairly well, then—"Oh, shit!"

"What is it? What is it?"

“Another pot of geraniums, baby, hit me in the small of the back, rolled down my back to my ass, then dropped off.”

“God *damn* the geraniums! Go ahead! Go ahead!”

“Oh, all right …”

All through the workout these pots kept falling down on me. It was like trying to screw during an aerial attack. I finally made it.

Later I said, “Look, baby, we’ve got to do something about those geraniums. “

“No, you leave them there!”

“Why, baby, why?”

“It adds to it.”

“It adds to it?”

“Yes.”

She just giggled. But the pots stayed up there. Most of the time.

7

Then I started coming home unhappy.

"What's the matter, Hank?"

I had to get drunk every night.

"It's the manager, Freddy. He has started whistling this song. He's whistling it when I come in in the morning and he never stops, and he's whistling it when I go home at night. It's been going on for two weeks!"

"What's the name of the song?"

"Around the World In Eighty Days. I never did like that song."

"Well, get another job."

"I will."

"But keep working there until you find another job. We've got to prove to them that …"

"All right. All right!"

8

I met an old drunk on the street one afternoon. I used to know him from the days with Betty when we made the rounds of the bars. He told me that he was now a postal clerk and that there was nothing to the job.

It was one of the biggest fattest lies of the century. I've been looking for that guy for years but I'm afraid somebody else has gotten to him first.

So there I was taking the civil service exam again. Only this time I marked the paper "clerk" instead of "carrier."

By the time I got the notice to report for the swearing-in ceremonies, Freddy had stopped whistling *Around the World in Eighty Days*, but I was looking forward to that soft job with "Uncle Sam."

I told Freddy, "I've got a little business to take care of, so I may take an hour or an hour and a half for lunch."

"O.K., Hank."

Little did I know how long that lunch would be.

9

There was a gang of us down there. 150 or 200. There were tedious papers to fill out. Then we all stood up and faced the flag. The guy who swore us in was the same guy who had sworn me in before.

After swearing us in, the guy told us:

“All right now, you’ve got a good job. Keep your nose clean and you’ve got the security the rest of your life.”

Security? You could get security in jail. Three squares and no rent to pay, no utilities, no income tax, no child support. No license plate fees. No traffic tickets. No drunk driving raps. No losses at the race track. Free medical attention. Comradeship with those with similar interests. Church. Roundeye. Free burial.

Nearly 12 years later, out of those 150 or 200, there would only be two of us left. Just like some guys can’t taxi or pimp or hustle dope, most guys, and gals too, can’t be postal clerks. And I don’t blame them. As the years went by, I saw them continue to march in in their squads of 150 or 200 and two, three, four remain out of each group-just enough to replace those who were retiring.

10

The guide took us all over the building. There were so many of us that they had to break us up into groups. We used the elevator in shifts. We were shown the employees’ cafeteria, the basement, all those dull things.

God o mighty, I thought, I wish he’d hurry up. My lunch is over two hours late now.

Then the guide handed us all timecards. He showed us the timeclocks.

“Now here is how you punch in.”

He showed us how. Then he said, “Now, you punch in. “

Twelve and one half hours later we punched out. That was one hell of a swearing-in ceremony.

11

After nine or ten hours people began getting sleepy and falling into their cases, catching themselves just in time. We were working the zoned mail. If a letter read zone 28 you stuck it to hole no. 28. It was simple.

One big black guy leaped up and began swinging his arms to keep awake. He staggered about the floor.

"God damn! I can't *stand* it!" he said.

And he was a big powerful brute. Using the same muscles over and over again was quite tiring. I ached all over. And at the end of the aisle stood a supervisor, another Stone, and he had this *look* on his face—they must practice it in front of mirrors, all the supervisors had this *look* on their faces—they looked at you as if you were a hunk of human shit. Yet they had come in through the same door. They had once been clerks or carriers. I couldn't understand it. They were handpicked screws.

You had to keep one foot on the floor at all times. One notch up on the restbar. What they called a "restbar" was a little round cushion set up on a stilt. No talking allowed. Two 10 minute breaks in eight hours. They wrote down the time when you left and the time when you came back. If you stayed 12 or 13 minutes, you heard about it.

But the pay was better than at the art store. And, I thought, I might get used to it. I never got used to it.

12

Then the supervisor moved us to a new aisle. We had been there 10 hours.

"Before you begin," the soup said, "I want to tell you something. Each tray of this type of mail must be stuck in 23 minutes. That's the production schedule. Now, just for fun, let's see if each of us can meet the production schedule! Now, one, two, three … GO!"

What the hell is this? I thought. I'm tired.

Each tray was two feet long. But each tray held different amounts of letters. Some trays had two or three times as much mail in them as others, depending upon the size of the letters.

Arms started flying. Fear of failure.

I took my time.

"When you finish your first tray, grab another! "

They really worked at it. Then they jumped up and grabbed another tray.

The supervisor walked up behind me. "Now," he said, pointing at me, "*this* man is making production. He's halfway through his second tray!"

It was my first tray. I didn't know if he were trying to con me or not, but since I was that far ahead of them I slowed down a little more.

13

At 3:30 a.m. my 12 hours were up. At that time they did not pay the subs time and one half for overtime. You just got straight time. And you hired in as a “temporary indefinite substitute clerk.”

I set the alarm so that I would be at the art store at 8 a.m.

“What happened, Hank? We thought maybe you had been in an auto accident. We kept waiting for you to come back.”

“I’m quitting.”

“Quitting?”

“Yes, you can’t blame a man for wanting to better himself. “

I walked into the office and got my check. I was back in the post office again.

14

Meanwhile, there was still Joyce, and her geraniums, and a couple of million if I could hang on. Joyce and the flies and the geraniums. I worked the night shift, 12 hours, and she pawed me during the day, trying to get me to perform. I'd be asleep and I'd awaken with this hand stroking me. Then I'd have to do it. The poor dear was mad.

Then I came in one morning and she said, "Hank, don't be mad."

I was too tired to be mad.

"What izzit, baby?"

"I got us a dog. A little pup dog."

"O.K. That's nice. There's nothing wrong with dogs. Where is he?"

"He's in the kitchen. I named him 'Picasso.'"

I walked in and looked at the dog. He couldn't see. Hair covered his eyes. I watched him walk. Then I picked him up and looked at his eyes. Poor Picasso!

"Baby, you know what you've gone and done?"

"You don't like him?"

"I didn't say I didn't like him. But he's a subnormal. He has an I.Q. of about 12. You've gone out and gotten us an idiot of a dog."

"How can you tell?"

"I can tell just by looking at him."

Just then Picasso started to piss. Picasso was full of piss. It ran in long yellow fat rivulets along the kitchen floor. Then Picasso finished, ran and looked at it.

I picked him up.

"Mop it up."

So Picasso was just one more problem.

I'd awaken after a 12-hour night with Joyce strumming me under the geraniums and I'd say, "Where's Picasso?"

"Oh god *damn* Picasso!" she'd say.

I'd get out of bed, naked, with this big thing in front of me.

"Look, you've left him out in the yard again! I *told* you not to leave him out in the yard in the daytime!"

Then I'd go out into the backyard, naked, too tired to dress. It was fairly well sheltered. And there would be poor Picasso, overrun with 500 flies, flies crawling all over him in circles. I'd run out with the thing (going down then) and curse those flies. They were in his eyes, under the hair, in his ears, on his privates, in his mouth … everywhere. And he'd just sit there and smile at me. Laugh at me, while the flies ate him up. Maybe he knew more than any of us. I'd pick him up and carry him into the house.

> "The little dog laughed
> To see such sport;
> And the dish ran away with the spoon."

"God damn it, Joyce! I've told you and told you and told you."

"Well, *you* were the one who housebroke him. He's got to go out there to crap!"

"Yes, but when he's through, bring him in. He doesn't have sense enough to come in himself. And wash away the crap when he's finished. You're creating a fly-paradise out there. "

Then as soon as I fell asleep, Joyce would begin stroking me again. That couple of million was a long time coming.

15

I was half asleep in a chair, waiting for a meal.

I got up for a glass of water and as I walked into the kitchen I saw Picasso walk up to Joyce and lick her ankle. I was barefooted and she didn't hear me. She had on high heels. She looked at him and her face was pure small-town hatred, white hot. She kicked him hard in the side with the point of her shoe. The poor fellow just ran in little circles, whimpering. Piss dripped from his bladder. I walked in for my glass of water. I held the glass in my hand and then before I could get the water into it I threw the glass at the cupboard to the left of the sink. Glass went everywhere. Joyce had time to cover her face. I didn't bother. I picked up the dog and walked out. I sat in the chair with him and petted the little shitsnot. He looked up at me and his tongue came out and licked my wrist. His tail wagged and flapped like a fish dying in a sack.

I saw Joyce on her knees with a paper sack, gathering glass. Then she began to sob. She tried to hide it. She turned her back to me but I could see the jolts of it, shaking her, tearing her.

I put Picasso down and walked into the kitchen. "Baby. Baby, *don't!*"

I picked her up from behind. She was limp.

"Baby, I'm sorry … I'm *sorry.*"

I held her up against me, my hand flat on her belly. I rubbed her belly easily and gently, trying to stop the convulsions.

"Easy, baby, easy now. Easy …"

She quieted a little. I pulled her hair back and kissed her behind the ear. It was warm back there. She jerked her head away. The next time I kissed her there she didn't jerk her head away. I could feel her inhale, then she let out a little moan. I picked her up and carried her to the other room, sat down in a chair with her in my lap. She wouldn't look at me. I kissed her throat and ears. One hand around her shoulders and the other above the hip. I moved the hand above her hip up and down with her breathing, trying to work the bad electricity out.

Finally, with the faintest of smiles, she looked at me. I reached out and bit the point of her chin.

"Crazy bitch!" I said.

She laughed and then we kissed, our heads moving back and forth. She began to sob again.

I pulled back and said, "DON'T!"

We kissed again. Then I picked her up and carried her to the bedroom, placed her on the bed, got my pants and shorts and shoes off *fast*, pulled her pants down over her shoes, got one of the shoes off, and then with one shoe off and one on, I gave her the best ride in months. Every geranium plant shook off the boards. When I finished, I nursed her back slowly, playing with her long hair, telling her things. She purred. Finally she got up and went to the bathroom.

She didn't come back. She went into the kitchen and began washing dishes and singing.

For Christ's sake, Steve McQueen couldn't have done better.

I had two Picassos on my hands.

16

After dinner or lunch or whatever it was—with my crazy 12-hour night I was no longer sure what was what—I said, “Look, baby, I’m sorry, but don’t you realize that this job is driving me crazy? Look, let’s give it up. Let’s just lay around and make love and take walks and talk a little. Let’s go to the zoo. Let’s look at animals. Let’s drive down and look at the ocean. It’s only 45 minutes. Let’s play games in the arcades. Let’s go to the races, the Art Museum, the boxing matches. Let’s have friends. Let’s laugh. This kind of life is like everybody else’s kind of life: it’s killing us. “

“No, Hank, we’ve got to show them, we’ve got to show them …”

It was the little small-town Texas girl speaking.

I gave it up.

17

Each night as I got ready to go on in, Joyce had my clothing laid out on the bed. Everything was the most expensive money could buy. I never wore the same pair of pants, the same shirt, the same shoes two nights in a row. There were dozens of different outfits. I put on whatever she laid out for me. Just like mama used to do.

I haven't come very far, I thought, and then I'd put the stuff on.

18

They had this thing called Training Class, and so for 30 minutes each night, anyhow, we didn't have to stick mail.

A big Italiano got up on the lecture platform to tell us where it was.

"… now there's nothing like the smell of good clean sweat but there's nothing worse than the smell of stale sweat …"

Good god, I thought, am I hearing right? This thing is government sanctioned, surely. This big oaf is telling me to wash under the armpits. They wouldn't do this to an engineer or a concertmaster. He's downgrading us.

"… so take a bath everyday. You will be graded upon appearance as well as production."

I think he wanted to use the word "hygienics" somewhere but it simply wasn't in him.

Then he went to the back of the lecture platform and pulled down a big map. And I mean big. It covered half the stage. A light was shone upon the map. And the big Italiano took a pointer with the little rubber nipple on the end of it like they used in grammar school and he pointed to the map: "Now, you see all this GREEN? Well, there's a hell of a lot of it. Look!"

He took the pointer and rubbed it back and forth along the green.

There was quite a bit more anti-Russian feeling then than there is now. China had not yet begun to flex her muscles. Vietnam was just a little firecracker party. But I still thought, I must be crazy! I can't be hearing right? But nobody in the audience protested. They needed jobs. And according to Joyce, I needed a job.

Then he said, "Look here. That's *Alaska!* And there *they* are! Looks almost as if they could jump across, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," said some brainwash job in the front row.

The Italiano flipped the map. It leaped crisply up into itself, crackling in war fury.

Then he walked to the front of the stage, pointed his rubber-titted pointer at us.

"I want you to understand that we've got to hold down the budget! I want you to understand that EACH LETTER YOU STICK—EACH SECOND, EACH MINUTE, EACH HOUR, EACH DAY, EACH WEEK-EACH EXTRA LETTER YOU STICK BEYOND DUTY HELPS DEFEAT THE RUSSIANS! Now, that's all for today. Before you leave, each of you will receive your scheme assignment. "

Scheme assignment. What was that?

Somebody came along handing out these sheets.

"Chinaski?" he said.

"Yeh?"

"You have zone 9."

"Thank you," I said.

I didn't realize what I was saying. Zone 9 was the largest station in the city. Some guys got tiny zones. It was the same as the two-foot tray in 23 minutes—they just rammed it into you.

19

The next night as they moved the group from the main building to the training building, I stopped to talk to Gus the old newsboy. Gus had once been third-ranked welterweight contender but he never got a look at the champ. He swung from the left side, and, as you know, nobody ever likes to fight a lefty—you've got to train your boy all over again. Why bother? Gus took me inside and we had a little nip from his bottle. Then I tried to catch the group.

The Italiano was waiting in the doorway. He saw me coming. He met me halfway in the yard. "Chinaski?"

"Yeh?"

"You're late."

I didn't say anything. We walked toward the building together.

"I've got half a mind to slap your wrist with a warning slip," he said.

"Oh, *please* don't do that, sir! *Please* don't!" I said as we walked along.

"All right," he said, "I'll let you go this time."

"Thank you, sir," I said, and we walked in together.

Want to know something? The son of a bitch had body odor.

20

Our 30 minutes was now devoted to scheme training. They gave us each a deck of cards to learn and stick into our cases. To pass the scheme you had to throw 100 cards in eight minutes or less with at least 95 percent accuracy. You were given three chances to pass, and if you failed the third time, they let you go. I mean, you were fired.

"Some of you won't make it," the Italiano said. "So maybe you were meant for something else. Maybe you will end up President of General Motors."

Then we were rid of Italiano and we had our nice little scheme instructor who encouraged us.

"You can do it, fellows, it's not as hard as it looks."

Each group had its own scheme instructor and they were graded too, upon the percentage of their group that passed. We had the guy with the lowest percentage. He was worried.

"There's nothing to it, fellows, just put your minds to it."

Some of the fellows had thin decks. I had the fattest deck of them all.

I just stood there in my fancy new clothes. Stood there with my hands in my pockets.

"Chinaski, what's the matter?" the instructor asked. "I know *you* can do it."

"Yeh. Yeh. I'm thinking right now."

"What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing."

And then I walked away.

A week later I was still standing there with my hands in my pockets and a sub walked up to me.

"Sir, I think that I am ready to throw my scheme now."

"Are you sure?" I asked him.

"I've been throwing 97, 98, 99 and a couple of 100s in my practice schemes."

"You must understand that we spend a great deal of money training you. We want you to have this thing down to the ace!"

"Sir, I truly believe that I am ready!"

"All right," I reached out and shook his hand, "go to it then, my boy, and the best of luck."

"Thank you, sir!"

He ran off towards the scheme room, a glass-enclosed fishbowl they put you in to see if you could swim their waters. Poor fish. What a comedown from being a smalltown villain. I walked into the practice room, took the rubber band off of the cards and looked at them for the first time.

"Oh, shit!" I said.

A couple of the guys laughed. Then the scheme instructor said, "Your 30 minutes are up. You will now return to the workfloor."

Which meant back to the 12 hours.

They couldn't keep enough help to get the mail out, so those who did remain had to do it all. On the schedule board they had us working two weeks straight but then we would get four days off. That kept us going. Four days rest. The last night before our four days off, the intercom came on.

"ATTENTION! ALL SUBS IN GROUP 409! ..." I was in group 409.

"... YOUR FOUR OFF DAYS HAVE BEEN CANCELED. YOU ARE SCHEDULED TO REPORT FOR WORK ON THOSE FOUR DAYS!"

21

Joyce found a job with the county, the county Police Department, of all things. I was living with a cop! But at least it was during the day, which gave me a little rest from those fondling hands except—Joyce bought two parakeets, and the damn things didn't talk, they just made these sounds all day.

Joyce and I met over breakfast and dinner—it was all very brisk—nice that way. Though she still managed to rape me now and then, it beat the other, except—the parakeets.

"Look, baby ..."

"Now what is it?"

"All right. I've gotten used to the geraniums and the flies and Picasso, but you've got to realize that I am working 12 hours a night and studying a scheme on the side, and you molest my remaining energy ..."

"Molest?"

"All right. I'm not saying it right. I'm sorry."

"What do you mean, 'molest'?"

"I said, forget it! Now look, it's the parakeets."

"So now it's the parakeets! Are they molesting you too?"

"Yes, they are."

"Who's on top?"

"Look, don't get funny. Don't get dirty. I'm trying to tell you something. "

"Now you're trying to tell me how to get!"

"All right! *Shit! You're* the one with the money! Are you going to let me talk or not? Answer me, yes or no?"

"All right, little baby: yes."

"All right. little baby says this: 'Mama! Mama! Those fucking parakeets are driving me nuts!' "

"All right, tell mama how the parakeets are driving you nuts."

"Well, it's like this, mama, the things chatter all day, they never stop, and I keep waiting for them to say something but they never say anything and I can't sleep all day from listening to the idiots!"

"All right, little baby. If they keep you awake, put them out."

"Put them out, mama?"

"Yes, put them out."

"All right, mama."

She gave me a kiss and then wiggled down the stairway on her way to her cop job.

I got in bed and tried to sleep. How they chattered! Every muscle in my body ached. If I lay on this side, if I lay on that side, if I lay on my back, I ached. I found the easiest way was on my stomach, but that grew tiresome. It took a good two or three minutes to get from one position to another.

I tossed and turned, cursing, screaming a little, and laughing a little too, at the ridiculousness of it. On they chattered. They got to me. What did they know of pain in their little cage? Eggheads yakking! Just feathers; brains the size of a pinhead.

I managed to get out of bed, go into the kitchen, fill a cup with water and then I walked up to the cage and threw the water all over them.

"Motherfuckers!" I cursed them.

They looked out at me balefully from under their wet feathers. They were *silent!* Nothing like the old water treatment. I had borrowed a page from the headshrinkers.

Then the green one with the yellow breast reached down and bit himself on the chest. Then he looked up and started chattering to the red one with the green breast, and then they were going again.

I sat on the edge of the bed and listened to them. Picasso walked up and bit me on the ankle.

That did it. I took the cage outside. Picasso followed me. 10,000 flies rose straight up into the air. I put the cage on the ground, opened the cage door and sat on the steps.

Both birds looked at that cage door. They couldn't understand it and they could. I could feel their tiny minds trying to function. They had their food and water right there, but what was that open space?

The green one with the yellow breast went first. He leaped down to the opening from his rung. He sat gripping the wire. He looked down at the flies. He stood there 15 seconds, trying to decide. Then something clicked in his little head. Or her little head. He didn't fly. He shot straight up into the sky. Up, up, up, up. Straight up! Straight as an arrow! Picasso and I sat there and watched. The damn thing was gone.

Then it was the red one with the green breast's turn.

The red one was much more hesitant. He walked around in the bottom of the cage, nervously. It was a hell of a decision. Humans, birds, everything has to make these decisions. It was a hard game.

So old red walked around thinking it over. Yellow sunlight. Buzzing flies. Man and dog looking on. All that sky, all that sky.

It was too much. Old red leaped to the wire. Three seconds.

ZOOP!

The bird was gone.

Picasso and I picked up the empty cage and walked back into the house.

I had a good sleep for the first time in weeks. I even forgot to set the alarm. I was riding a white horse down Broadway, New York City. I had just been elected mayor. I had this big hard-on, and then somebody threw a hunk of mud at me … and Joyce shook me.

"What happened to the birds?"

"Damn the birds! I am the mayor of New York!"

"I asked you about the birds! All I see is an empty cage! "

"Birds? Birds? What birds?"

"Wake up, damn you!"

"Hard day at the office dear? You seem snappish."

"Where ARE the BIRDS?"

"You said to put them out if they kept me awake."

“I meant to put them in the back porch or outside, you fool!”

“Fool?”

“Yes, you fool! Do you mean to say you let those birds out of the cage? Do you mean to say you really let them out of the cage?”

“Well, all I can say is, they are not locked in the bathroom, they are not in the cupboard.”

“They’ll starve out there!”

“They can catch worms, eat berries, all that stuff.”

“They can’t, they can’t. They don’t know how! They’ll die!”

“Let ‘em learn or let ‘em die,” I said, and then I turned slowly over and went back to sleep. Vaguely, I could hear her cooking her dinner, dropping lids and spoons on the floor, cursing. But Picasso was on the bed with me, Picasso was safe from her sharp shoes. I put my hand out and he licked it and then I slept.

That is, I did for a while. Next thing I knew I was being fondled. I looked up and she was staring into my eyes like a madwoman. She was naked, her breasts dangling in my eyes. Her hair tickling my nostrils. I thought of her millions, picked her up, flipped her on her back and stuck it in.

22

She wasn't really a cop, she was a clerk-cop. And she started coming in and telling me about a guy who wore a purple stickpin and was a "real gentleman."

"Oh, he's so *kind!*"

I heard all about him each night.

"Well," I'd ask, "how was old Purple Stickpin tonight?"

"Oh," she said, "you know what happened?"

"No, babe, that's why I'm asking."

"Oh, he's SUCH a gentleman!"

"All right. All right. What happened?"

"You know, he has *suffered* so much!"

"Of course."

"His wife died, you know."

"No, I didn't."

"Don't be so flip. I'm telling you, his wife died and it cost him 15 thousand dollars in medical and burial bills."

"All right. So?"

"I was walking down the hall. He was coming the other way. We met. He looked at me and with this Turkish accent he said, 'Ah, you are so beautiful!' And you know what he did?"

"No, babe, tell me. Tell me quick."

"He kissed me on the forehead, lightly, ever so lightly. And then he walked on."

"I can tell you something about him, babe. He's seen too many movies."

"How did you know?"

"Whatcha mean?"

"He owns a drive-in theatre. He operates it after work each night."

“That figures,” I said. “But he’s *such* a gentleman!” she said. “Look, babe, I don’t want to hurt you, but—”

“But what?”

“Look, you’re small-town. I’ve had over 50 jobs, maybe a hundred. I’ve never stayed anywhere long. What I am trying to say is, there is a certain game played in offices all over America. The people are bored, they don’t know what to do, so they play the office-romance game. Most of the time it means nothing but the passing of time. Sometimes they do manage to work off a screw or two on the side. But even then, it is just an offhand pastime, like bowling or t.v. or a New Year’s Eve party. You’ve got to understand that it doesn’t mean anything and then you won’t get hurt. Do you understand what I mean?”

“I think that Mr. Partisian is sincere.”

“You’re going to get stuck with that pin, babe, don’t forget I told you. Watch those slicks. They are as phony as a lead dime.”

“He’s not phony. He’s a gentleman. He’s a real gentleman. I wish you were a gentleman. “

I gave it up. I sat on the couch and took my scheme sheet and tried to memorize Babcock Boulevard. Babcock broke: 14, 39, 51, 62. What the hell? Couldn’t I remember that?

23

I finally got a day off, and you know what I did? I got up early before Joyce got back in and I went down to the market to do a little shopping, and maybe I was crazy. I walked through the market and instead of getting a nice red steak or even a bit of frying chicken, you know what I did? I hit snake-eyes and walked over to the Oriental section and began filling my basket full of octopi, sea-spiders, snails, seaweed and so forth. The clerk gave me a strange look and began ringing it up.

When Joyce came home that night, I had it all on the table, ready. Cooked seaweed mixed with a dash of sea-spider, and piles of little golden, fried-in-butter snails.

I took her into the kitchen and showed her the stuff on the table.

“I’ve cooked this in your honor,” I said, “In dedication of our love. “

“What the hell’s that shit?” she asked.

“Snails. “

“Snails?”

“Yes, don’t you realize that for many centuries Orientals have thrived upon this and the like? Let us honor them and honor ourselves. It’s fried in butter.”

Joyce came in and sat down.

I started snapping snails into my mouth.

“God damn, they are good, baby! TRY ONE!”

Joyce reached down and forked one into her mouth while looking at the others on her plate.

I jammed in a big mouthful of delicious seaweed.

“Good, huh, baby?”

She chewed the snail in her mouth.

“Fried in golden butter!”

I picked up a few with my hand, tossed them into my mouth.

"The centuries are on our side, babe. We can't go wrong!"

She finally swallowed hers. Then examined the others on her plate.

"They all have tiny little *assholes!* It's horrible! Horrible!"

"What's horrible about assholes, baby?"

She held a napkin to her mouth. Got up and ran to the bathroom. She began vomiting. I hollered in from the kitchen: "WHAT'S WRONG WITH ASSHOLES, BABY? YOU'VE GOT AN ASSHOLE, I'VE GOT AN ASSHOLE! YOU GO TO THE STORE AND BUY A PORTERHOUSE STEAK, THAT HAD AN ASSHOLE! ASSHOLES COVER THE EARTH! IN A WAY TREES HAVE ASSHOLES BUT YOU CAN'T FIND THEM, THEY JUST DROP THEIR LEAVES. YOUR ASSHOLE, MY ASSHOLE, THE WORLD IS FULL OF BILLIONS OF ASSHOLES. THE PRESIDENT HAS AN ASSHOLE, THE CARWASH BOY HAS AN ASSHOLE, THE JUDGE AND THE MURDERER HAVE ASSHOLES … EVEN PURPLE STICKPIN HAS AN ASSHOLE!"

"Oh stop it! STOP IT!"

She heaved again. Small town. I opened the bottle of sake and had a drink.

24

It was about a week later around 7 a.m. I had lucked into another day off and after a double workout, I was up against Joyce's ass, her asshole, sleeping, verily sleeping, and then the doorbell rang and I got out of bed and answered the thing.

There was a small man in a necktie. He jammed some papers into my hand and ran away.

It was a summons, for divorce. There went my millions. But I wasn't angry because I had never expected her millions anyhow.

I awakened Joyce.

"What?"

"Couldn't you have had me awakened at a more decent hour?"

I showed her the papers. "I'm sorry, Hank."

"That's O.K. All you had to do was tell me. I would have agreed. We just made love twice and laughed and had fun. I don't understand it. And you knew all along. God damn if I can understand a woman. "

"Look, I filed when we had an argument. I thought, if I wait until I cool off I'll never do it."

"O.K., babe, I admire an honest woman. Is it Purple Stickpin?"

"It's Purple Stickpin," she said.

I laughed. It was a rather sad laugh, I'll admit. But it came out.

"It's easy to second guess. But you're going to have trouble with him. I wish you luck, babe. You know there's a lot of you I've loved and it hasn't been entirely your money."

She began to cry into the pillow, on her stomach, shaking all over. She was just a small-town girl, spoiled and mixed-up. There she shook, crying, nothing fake about it. It was terrible.

The blankets had fallen off and I stared down at her white back, the shoulder blades sticking out as if they wanted to grow into wings, poke through that skin. Little blades. She was helpless.

I got into bed, stroked her back, stroked her, stroked her, calmed her—then she'd break down again: "Oh Hank, I love you, I love you, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry sorry so sorry!"

She was really on the rack.

After a while, I began to feel as if I were the one who was divorcing *her*.

Then we knocked off a good one for old time's sake.

She got the place, the dog, the flies, the geraniums.

She even helped me pack. Folding my pants neatly into suitcases. Packing in my shorts and razor. When I was ready to leave she started crying again. I bit her on the ear, the right one, then went down the stairway with my stuff. I got into the car and began cruising up and down the streets looking for a For Rent sign.

It didn't seem to be an unusual thing to do.

THREE

1

I didn't contest the divorce, didn't go to court. Joyce gave me the car. She didn't drive. All I had lost was three or four million. But I still had the post office.

I met Betty on the street.

"I saw you with that bitch a while back. She's not your kind of woman."

"None of them are."

I told her it was over. We went for a beer. Betty had gotten old, fast. Heavier. The lines had come in. Flesh hung under the throat. It was sad. But I had gotten old too.

Betty had lost her job. The dog had been run over and killed. She got a job as a waitress, then lost that when they tore down the cafe to erect an office building. Now she lived in a small room in a loser's hotel. She changed the sheets there and cleaned the bathrooms. She was on wine. She suggested that we might get together again. I suggested that we might wait awhile. I was just getting over a bad one.

She went back to her room and put on her best dress, high heels, tried to fix up. But there was a terrible sadness about her.

We got a fifth of whiskey and some beer, went up to my place on the fourth floor of an old apartment house. I picked up the phone and called in sick. I sat across from Betty. She crossed her legs, kicked her heels, laughed a little. It was like old times. Almost. Something was missing.

At that time, when you called in sick the post office sent out a nurse to spot check, to make sure you weren't night-clubbing or sitting in a poker parlor. My place was close to the central office, so it was convenient for them to check up on me. Betty and I had been there about two hours when there was a knock on the door.

"What's that?"

"All right," I whispered, "shut up! Take off those high heels, go into the kitchen and don't make a sound."

"JUST A MOMENT!" I answered the knocker.

I lit a cigarette to kill my breath, then went to the door and opened it a notch. It was the nurse. The same one. She knew me.

"Now what's your trouble?" she asked. I blew out a little roll of smoke. "Upset stomach."

"Are you sure?"

"It's my stomach."

"Will you sign this form to show that I called here and that you were at home?"

"Surely."

The nurse slipped the form in sideways. I signed it. Slipped it back out.

"Will you be in to work tomorrow?"

"I have no way of knowing. If I'm well, I'll come in. If not, I'll stay out."

She gave me a dirty look and walked off. I knew she had smelled whiskey on my breath. Proof enough? Probably not, too many technicalities, or maybe she was laughing as she got into her car with her little black bag.

"All right," I said, "get on your shoes and come on out."

"Who was it?"

"A post office nurse."

"Is she gone?"

"Yeh."

"Do they do that all the time?"

"They haven't missed yet. Now let's each have a good tall drink to celebrate!"

I walked into the kitchen and poured two good ones. I came out and handed Betty her drink.

"Salud!" I said.

We raised our glasses high, clicked them.

Then the *alarm* clock went off and it was a loud one.

I jerked as if I had been shot in the back. Betty leaped a foot into the air, straight up. I ran over to the clock and shut off the alarm.

"Jesus," she said, "I almost shit myself!"

We both started laughing. Then we sat down. Had the good drink.

"I had a boyfriend who worked for the county," she said. "They used to send out an inspector, a guy, but not everytime, maybe one time in five. So this night I am drinking with Harry—that was his name: Harry. This night I am drinking with Harry and there's a knock on the door. Harry's sitting on the couch with all his clothes on. 'Oh Jesus Christ!' he says, and he leaps into bed with all his clothes on and pulls the covers up. I put the bottles and glasses under the bed and open the door. This guy comes in and sits on the couch. Harry even has his shoes and stockings on but he is completely under the covers. The guy says, 'How you feeling, Harry?' And Harry says, 'Not so good. She's over to take care of me.' He points at me. I was sitting there drunk. 'Well, I hope you get well, Harry,' the guy says, and then he leaves. I'm sure he saw those bottles and glasses under the bed, and I'm sure he knew that Harry's feet weren't *that* big. It was a jumpy time."

"Damn, they won't let a man live at all, will they? They always want him at the wheel."

"Of course."

We drank a little longer and then we went to bed, but it wasn't the same, it never is—there was space between us, things had happened. I watched her walk to the bathroom, saw the wrinkles and folds under the cheeks of her ass. Poor thing. Poor poor thing. Joyce had been firm and hard—you grabbed a handful and it felt good. Betty didn't feel so good. It was sad, it was sad, it was sad. When Betty came back we didn't sing or laugh, or even argue. We sat drinking in the dark, smoking cigarettes, and when we went to sleep, I didn't put my feet on her body or she on mine like we used to. We slept without touching.

We had both been robbed.

2

I phoned Joyce.

"How's it working with Purple Stickpin?"

"I can't understand it," she said. "What did he do when you told him you were divorced?"

"We were sitting across from each other in the employees' cafeteria when I told him."

"What happened?"

"He dropped his fork. His mouth fell open. He said, 'What?' "

"He knew you meant business then."

"I can't understand it. He's been avoiding me ever since. When I see him in the hall he runs away. He doesn't sit across from me anymore when we eat. He seems … well, almost … cold."

"Baby, there are other men. Forget that guy. Set your sails for a new one."

"It's hard to forget him. I mean, the way he was."

"Does he know that you have money?"

"No, I have never told him, he doesn't know."

"Well, if you want him …"

"No, no! I don't want him that way!"

"All right, then. Goodbye Joyce."

"Goodbye, Hank."

It wasn't long after that, I got a letter from her. She was back in Texas. Grandma was very sick, she wasn't expected to live long. People were asking about me. So forth. Love, Joyce.

I put the letter down and I could see that midget wondering how I had missed out. Little shaking freak, thinking I was such a clever bastard. It was hard to let him down like that.

3

Then I was called down to personnel at the old Federal Building. They let me sit the usual 45 minutes or hour and one half.

Then. “Mr. Chinaski?” this voice said. “Yeh,” I said. “Step in.”

The man walked me back to a desk. There sat this woman. She looked a bit sexy, melting into 38 or 39, but she looked as if her sexual ambition had either been laid aside for other things or as if it had been ignored. “Sit down, Mr. Chinaski.” I sat down.

Baby, I thought, I could really give you a ride. “Mr. Chinaski,” she said, “we have been wondering if you have filled out this application properly.”

“Uh?”

“We mean, the arrest record.”

She handed me the sheet. There wasn’t any sex in her eyes.

I had listed eight orten common drunk raps. It was only an estimate. I had no idea of the dates.

“Now, have you listed *everything?”* she asked me.

“Hmmm, hmmm, let me think …”

I knew what she wanted. She wanted me to say “yes” and then she had me.

“Let me see … Hmmm. Hmmm.”

“Yes?” she said.

“Oh oh! My god!”

“What is it?”

“It’s either drunk in auto or drunk driving. About four years ago or so. I don’t know the exact date.”

“And this was a slip of the mind?”

“Yes, really, I meant to put it down.”

“All right. Put it down.” I wrote it down.

"Mr. Chinaski. This is a terrible record. I want you to explain these charges and if possible justify your present employment with us."

"All right."

"You have 10 days to reply."

I didn't want the job that badly. But she irritated me. I phoned in sick that night after buying some ruled and numbered legal paper and a blue, very official-looking folder. I got a fifth of whiskey and a six-pack, then sat down and typed it out. I had the dictionary at my elbow. Every now and then I would flip a page, find a large incomprehensible word and build a sentence or a paragraph out of the idea. It ran 42 pages. I finished up with, "Copies of this statement have been retained for distribution to the press, television, and other mass communication media."

I was full of shit.

She got up from her desk and got it personally. "Mr. Chinaski?"

"Yes?"

It was 9 a.m. One day after her request to answer charges. "Just a moment."

She took the 42 pages back to her desk. She read and read and read. There was somebody reading over her shoulder. Then there were 2, 3, 4, 5. All reading. 6, 7, 8, 9. All reading.

What the hell? I thought.

Then I heard a voice from the crowd, "Well, all geniuses are drunkards!" As if that explained away the matter. Too many movies again.

She got up from the desk with the 42 pages in her hand.

"Mr. Chinaski?"

"Yes?"

"Your case will be continued. You will hear from us."

"Meanwhile, continue working?"

"Meanwhile, continue working."

"Good morning," I said.

4

One night I was assigned to the stool next to Butchner. He didn't stick any mail. He just sat there. And talked.

A young girl came in and sat down at the end of the aisle. I heard Butchner. "Yeah, you cunt! You want my cock in your pussy, don't you? That's what you want, you cunt, don't you?"

I went on sticking mail. The soup walked past. Butchner said, "You're on my list, mother! I'm going to get you, you dirty mother! You rotten bastard! Cocksucker!"

The supervisors never bothered Butchner. Nobody ever bothered Butchner.

Then I heard him again. "All right, baby! I don't like that look on your face! You're on my list, mother! You're right there on top of my list! I'm going to get your ass! Hey, I'm talking to you! You hear me?"

It was too much. I threw my mail down.

"All right," I told him, "I'm calling your card! I'm calling your whole stinking deck! You wanna go right here or outside?"

I looked at Butchner. He was talking to the ceiling, insane: "I told you, you're on top of my list! I'm going to get you and I'm going to get you good!"

O for Christ's sake, I thought, I really sucked into that one! The clerks were very quiet. I couldn't blame them. I got up, went to get a drink of water. Then came back. Twenty minutes later I got up to take my 10 minute break. When I got back, the supervisor was waiting.

A fat black man in his early fifties. He screamed at me: "CHTNASKI!"

"What's the matter, man?" I asked.

"You've left your seat twice in 30 minutes!"

"Yeah, I got a drink of water the first time. Thirty seconds. Then later I took my break."

"Suppose you worked at a machine? You couldn't leave your machine twice in 30 minutes!"

His whole face glistened in fury. It was astounding. I couldn't understand it.

"I'M WRITING YOU UP!"

"All right," I said.

I went down and sat next to Butchner. The supervisor came running down with the write-up. It was written in longhand. I couldn't even read it. He had written in such fury that it had all come out in blots and slants.

I folded the write-up into a neat package, slipped it in my rear pocket.

"I'm going to kill that son of a bitch!" Butchner said.

"I wish you would, fat boy," I said, "I wish you would."

5

It was 12 hours a night, plus supervisors, plus clerks, plus the fact that you could hardly breathe in that pack of flesh, plus stale baked food in the “non-profit” cafeteria.

Plus the CP1. City Primary 1. That station scheme was nothing compared to the City Primary 1. Which contained about one-third of the streets in the city and how they were broken up into zone numbers. I lived in one of the largest cities in the U.S. That was a lot of streets. After that there was CP2. And CP3. You had to pass each test in 90 days, three shots at it, 95 percent or better, 100 cards in a glass cage, eight minutes, fail and they let you try for President of General Motors, as the man said. For those who got through, the schemes would get a little easier, the second or third time around. But with the 12-hour night and canceled days off, it was too much for most. Already, out of our original group of 150 to 200, there were only 17 or 18 of us left.

“How can I work 12 hours a night, sleep, eat, bathe, travel back and forth, get the laundry and the gas, the rent, change tires, do all the little things that have to be done and still study the scheme?” I asked one of the instructors in the scheme room.

“Do without sleep,” he told me.

I looked at him. He wasn’t playing *Dixie* on the harmonica. The damn fool was serious.

6

I found that the only time to study was before sleeping. I was always too tired to make and eat breakfast, so I would go out and buy a tall six-pack, put it on the chair beside the bed, rip open a can, take a good pull and then open the scheme sheet. About the time I got to the third can of beer I had to drop the sheet. You could only inject so much. Then I'd drink the rest of the beer, sitting up in bed, staring at the walls. With the last can I'd be asleep. And when I awakened, there was just time to toilet, bathe, eat, and drive back on in.

And you didn't adjust, you simply got more and more tired. I always picked up my six-pack on the way in, and one morning I was really done. I climbed the stairway (there was no elevator) and put the key in. The door swung open. Somebody had changed all the furniture around, put in a new rug. No, the furniture was new too.

There was a woman on the couch. She looked all right. Young. Good legs. Blonde.

"Hello," I said, "care for a beer?"

"Hi!" she said. "All right, I'll have one."

"I like the way this place is fixed up," I told her.

"I did it myself."

"But *why?*"

"I just felt like it," she said. We each drank at the beer.

"You're all right," I said. I put my beercan down and gave her a kiss. I put my hand on one of her knees. It was a nice knee.

Then I had another swallow of beer.

"Yes," I said, "I really like the way this place looks. It's really going to lift my spirits."

"That's nice. My husband likes it too."

“Now why would your husband … What? Your husband? Look, what’s this apartment number?”

“309.”

“309? Great Christ! I’m on the wrong floor! I live in 409. My key opened your door.”

“Sit down, sweetie,” she said. “No, no …”

I picked up the four remaining beers.

“Why rush right off?” she asked.

“Some men are crazy,” I said, moving toward the door.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, some men are in love with their wives.”

She laughed. “Don’t forget where I’m at.”

I closed the door and walked up one more flight. Then I opened my door. There was nobody in there. The furniture was old and ripped, the rug almost colorless. Empty beercans on the floor. I was in the right place.

I took off my clothes, climbed into bed alone and cracked another beer.

7

While working Dorsey Station I heard some of the old timers needling Big Daddy Greystone about how he'd had to buy a tape recorder in order to learn his schemes. Big Daddy had read the scheme sheet breaks onto the tape and listened to it as it played back. Big Daddy was called Big Daddy for obvious reasons. He'd put three women in the hospital with that thing. Now he'd found some roundeye. A fag named Carter. He'd even ripped Carter up. Carter had gone to a hospital in Boston. The joke was that Carter had to go all the way to Boston because there wasn't enough string on the West Coast to sew him up after Big Daddy finished with him. True or not, I decided to try the tape recorder. My worries were over. I could leave it on while I was sleeping. I had read somewhere that you could learn with your subconscious while sleeping. That seemed the easiest way out. I bought a machine and some tape.

I read the scheme sheet onto the tape, got into bed with my beer and listened: "NOW, HIGGINS BREAKS 42 HUNTER, 67 MARKLEY, 71 HUDSON, 84 EVERGLADES! AND NOW, LISTEN, LISTEN, CHINASKI, PITTSFIELD BREAKS 21 ASHGROVE, 33 SIMMONS, 46 NEEDLES! LISTEN, CHINASKI, LISTEN, WESTHAVEN BREAKS 11 EVERGREEN, 24 MARKHAM, 55 WOODTREE!

CHINASKI, ATTENTION, CHINASKI! PARCHBLEAK BREAKS …"

It didn't work. My voice put me to sleep. I couldn't get past the third beer.

After a while I didn't play the recorder or study the scheme sheet. I just drank my six tall cans of beer and went to sleep. I couldn't understand it. I even thought about going to see a psychiatrist. I envisioned the thing in my mind: "Yes, my boy?"

"Well, it's like this."

"Go ahead. You need the couch?"

"No, thanks. I'd fall asleep."

"Go ahead, please."

"Well, I need my job."

"That's rational."

"But I have to study and pass three more schemes in order to keep it."

"Schemes? What are these 'schemes'?"

"That's when people don't put down zone numbers. Somebody has to stick that letter. So we have to study these scheme sheets after working 12 hours a night."

"And?"

"I can't pick the sheet up. If Ido, it falls from my hand."

"You can't study these schemes?"

"No. And I have to throw 100 cards in a glass cage in eight minutes to at least an accuracy of 95 percent or I'm out. And I need the job."

"Why can't you study these schemes?"

"That's why I'm here. To ask *you*. I must be crazy. But there are all these streets and they all break in different ways. Here look."

And I would hand him the six-page scheme, stapled together at the top, small print on both sides.

He would flip through the pages.

"And you are supposed to memorize all this?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"Well, my boy," handing the sheets back, "you're not crazy for not wanting to study this. I'd be more apt to say that you were crazy if you *wanted* to study this. That'll be $25."

So I analyzed myself and kept the money.

But something had to be done. Then I had it. It was about 9:10 a.m. I phoned the Federal Building, Personnel Department.

"Miss Graves. I'd like to speak to Miss Graves, please."

"Hello?"

There she was. The bitch. I fondled myself as I spoke to her.

"Miss Graves. This is Chinaski. I filed an answer to your charge that I had a bad record. I don't know if you remember me?"

"We remember you, Mr. Chinaski."

"Has any decision been rendered?"

"Not yet. We'll let you know."

"All right, then. But I have a problem."

"Yes, Mr. Chinaski?"

"I am now studying the CP1." I paused.

"Yes?" she asked.

"I find it very difficult, I find it almost impossible to study this scheme, to put in all that extra time when it might be of no avail. I mean, I may be removed from the postal service at any moment. It is not fair to ask me to study the scheme under these conditions."

"All right, Mr. Chinaski. I'll phone the scheme room and instruct them to take you off the scheme until we have reached a decision."

"Thank you, Miss Graves."

"Good day," she said, and hung up.

It was a good day. And after fondling myself while on the phone I almost decided to go downstairs to 309. But I played it safe. I put on some bacon and eggs and celebrated with an extra quart of beer.

8

Then there were only six or seven of us. The CP1 was simply too much for the rest.

"How you doing on your scheme, Chinaski?" they asked me.

"No trouble at all," I said. "O.K., break Woodburn Ave."

"Woodburn?"

"Yes, Woodburn."

"Listen, I don't like to be bothered with that stuff while I'm working. It bores me. One job at a time."

9

On Christmas I had Betty over. She baked a turkey and we drank. Betty always liked huge Christmas trees. It must have been seven feet tall, and half as wide, covered with lights, bulbs, tinsel, various crap. We drank from a couple of fifths of whiskey, made love, ate our turkey, drank some more. The nail in the stand was loose and the stand was not big enough to hold the tree. I kept straightening it. Betty stretched out on the bed, passed out. I was drinking on the floor with my shorts on. Then I stretched out. Closed my eyes. Something awakened me. I opened my eyes. Just in time to see the huge tree covered with hot lights, lean slowly toward me, the pointed star coming down like a dagger. I didn't quite know what it was. It looked like the end of the world. I couldn't move. The arms of the tree enfolded me. I was under it. The light bulbs were red hot.

"Oh, OH JESUS CHRIST, MERCY! LORD HELP ME! JESUS! JESUS! HELP!"

The bulbs were burning me. I rolled to the left, couldn't get out, then I rolled to the right.

"YAWK!"

I finally rolled out from under. Betty was up, standing there.

"What happened? What is it?"

"CAN'T YOU SEE? THAT GOD DAMNED TREE TRIED TO MURDER ME!"

"What?"

"YES, LOOK AT ME!"

I had red spots all over my body.

"Oh, *poor* baby!"

I walked over and pulled the plug from the wall. The lights went out. The thing was dead. "Oh, my poor tree!"

"Your poor tree?"

"Yes, it was *so* pretty!"

"I'll stand it up in the morning. I don't trust it now. I'm giving it the rest of the night off."

She didn't like that. I could see an argument coming, so I stood the thing up behind a chair and turned the lights back on. If the thing had burned her tits or ass, she would have thrown it out the window. I thought I was being very kind.

Several days after Christmas I stopped in to see Betty. She was sitting in her room, drunk, at 8:45 in the morning. She didn't look well but then neither did I. It seemed that almost every roomer had given her a fifth. There was wine, vodka, whiskey, scotch. The cheapest brands. The bottles filled her room.

"Those damn fools! Don't they *know* any better? If you drink all this stuff it will kill you!"

Betty just looked at me. I saw it all in that look.

She had two children who never came to see her, never wrote her. She was a scrubwoman in a cheap hotel. When I had first met her her clothes had been expensive, trim ankles fitting into expensive shoes. She had been firm-fleshed, almost beautiful. Wild-eyed. Laughing. Coming from a rich husband, divorced from him, and he was to die in a car wreck, drunk, burning to death in Connecticut. "You'll never tame her," they told me.

There she was. But I'd had some help.

"Listen," I said, "I ought to take that stuff. I mean, I'll just give you back a bottle now and then. I won't drink it."

"Leave the bottles," Betty said. She didn't look at me. Her room was on the top floor and she sat in a chair by the window watching the morning traffic.

I walked over. "Look, I'm beat. I've got to leave. But for Christ's sake, take it easy on that stuff!"

"Sure," she said.

I leaned over and kissed her goodbye.

About a week and a half later I came by again. There wasn't any answer to my knock.

"Betty! Betty! Are you all right?"

I turned the knob. The door was open. The bed was turned back. There was a large bloodspot on the sheet.

"Oh shit!" I said. I looked around. All the bottles were gone.

Then I looked around. There was a middle-aged Frenchwoman who owned the place. She stood in the doorway.

"She's at County General Hospital. She was very sick. I called the ambulance last night."

"Did she drink all that stuff?"

"She had some help."

I ran down the stairway and got into my car. Then I was there. I knew the place well. They told me the room number.

There were three or four beds in a tiny room. A woman was sitting up in hers across the way, chewing an apple and laughing with two female visitors. I pulled the drop sheet around Betty's bed, sat down on the stool and leaned over her.

"Betty! Betty!"

I touched her arm.

"Betty!"

Her eyes opened. They were beautiful again. Bright calm blue.

"I knew it would be you," she said.

Then she closed her eyes. Her lips were parched. Yellow spittle had caked at the left corner of her mouth. I took a cloth and washed it away. I cleaned her face, hands and throat. I took another cloth and squeezed a bit of water on her tongue. Then a little more. I wet her lips. I straightened her hair. I heard the women laughing through the sheets that separated us.

"Betty, Betty, Betty. Please, I want you to drink some water, just a sip of water, not too much, just a sip."

She didn't respond. I tried for 10 minutes. Nothing.

More spittle formed at her mouth. I wiped it away.

Then I got up and pulled the drop sheet back. I stared at the three women.

I walked out and spoke to the nurse at the desk.

"Listen, why isn't anything being done for that woman in 45-C? Betty Williams."

"We're doing all we can, sir."

“But there’s nobody there.”

“We make our regular rounds.”

“But where are the doctors? I don’t see any doctors.”

“The doctor has seen her, sir.”

“Why do you just let her lay there?”

“We’ve done all we can, sir.”

“SIR! SIR! SIR! FORGET THAT ‘SIR’ STUFF, WILL YOU? I’ll bet if that were the president or governor or mayor or some rich son of a bitch, there would be doctors all over that room doing *something!* Why do you just let them die? What’s the sin in being poor?”

“I’ve told you, sir, that we’ve done ALL we can.”

“I’ll be back in two hours.”

“Are you her husband?”

“I used to be her common-law husband.”

“May we have your name and phone number?”

I gave her that, then hurried out.

10

The funeral was to be at 10:30 a.m. but it was already hot. I had on a cheap black suit, bought and fitted in a rush. It was my first new suit in years. I had located the son. We drove along in his new Mercedes-Benz. I had traced him down with the help of a slip of paper with the address of his father-in-law on it. Two long distance calls and I had him. By the time he had driven in, his mother was dead. She died while I was making the phone calls. The kid, Larry, had never fit into the society thing. He had a habit of stealing cars from friends, but between the friends and the judge he managed to get off. Then the army got him, and somehow he got into a training program and when he got out he walked into a good-paying job. That's when he stopped seeing his mother, when he got that good job.

"Where's your sister?" I asked him.

"I don't know."

"This is a fine car. I can't even hear the engine." Larry smiled. He liked that.

There were just three of us going to the funeral: son, lover and the subnormal sister of the owner of the hotel. Her name was Marcia. Marcia never said anything. She just sat around with this inane smile on her lips. Her skin was white as enamel. She had a mop of dead yellow hair and a hat that would not fit. Marcia had been sent by the owner in her place. The owner had to watch the hotel.

Of course, I had a very bad hangover. We stopped for coffee.

Already there had been trouble with the funeral. Larry had had an argument with the Catholic priest. There was some doubt that Betty was a true Catholic. The priest didn't want to do the service. Finally it was decided that he would do half a service. Well, half a service was better than none.

We even had trouble with the flowers. I had bought a wreath of roses, mixed roses, and they had been worked into a wreath. The flower shop spent an afternoon making it. The lady in the flower shop had known Betty. They had drank together a few years earlier when Betty and I had the house and dog. Delsie, her name was. I had always wanted to get into Delsie's pants but I never made it.

Delsie had phoned me. "Hank, what's the *matter* with those bastards?"

"Which bastards?"

"Those guys at the mortuary."

"What is it?"

"Well, I sent the boy in the truck to deliver your wreath and they didn't want to let him in. They said they were closed. You know, that's a long drive up there."

"Yeah, Delsie?"

"So finally they let the boy put the flowers inside the door but they wouldn't let him put them in the refrigerator. So the boy had to leave them inside the door. What the hell's wrong with those people?"

"I don't know. What the hell's wrong with people everywhere?"

"I won't be able to be at the funeral. Are you all right, Hank?"

"Why don't you come by and console me?"

"I'd have to bring Paul." Paul was her husband. "Forget it."

So there we were on our way to half a funeral. Larry looked up from his coffee. "I'D write you about a headstone later. I don't have any more money now."

"All right," I said.

Larry paid for the coffees, then we went out and climbed into the Mercedes-Benz. "Wait a minute," I said. "What is it?" asked Larry. "I think we forgot something." I walked back into the cafe. "Marcia."

She was still sitting at the table. "We're leaving now, Marcia." She got up and followed me out.

The priest read his thing. I didn't listen. There was the coffin. What had been Betty was in there. It was very hot. The sun came down in one yellow sheet. A fly circled around. Halfway through the halfway funeral two guys in working clothes came carrying my wreath. The roses were dead, dead and dying in the heat, and they leaned the thing up against a nearby tree. Near the end of the service my wreath leaned forward and fell flat on its face. Nobody picked it up. Then it was over. I walked up to the priest and shook his hand, "Thank you." He smiled. That made two smiling: the priest and Marcia.

On the way in, Larry said again:

"I'll write you about the headstone."

I'm still waiting for that letter.

11

I went upstairs to 409, had a stiff scotch and water, took some money out of the top drawer, went down the steps, got in my car and drove to the racetrack. I got there in time for the first race but didn't play it because I hadn't had time to read the form.

I went to the bar for a drink and I saw this high yellow walk by in an old raincoat. She was really dressed *down* but since I felt that way, I called her name just loud enough for her to hear as she walked by: "Vi, baby."

She stopped, then came on over. "Hi, Hank. How are you?"

I knew her from the central post office. She worked another station, the one near the water fountain, but she seemed more friendly than most.

"I've got the low blues. Third funeral in two years. First my mother, then my father. Today, an old girl friend."

She ordered something. I opened the Form.

"Let's catch this second race."

She came over and leaned a lot of leg and breast against me. There was something under that raincoat. I always look for the non-public horse who could beat the favorite. If I found nobody could beat the favorite, I bet the favorite.

I had come to the racetrack after the other two funerals and had won. There was something about funerals. It made you see things better. A funeral a day and I'd be rich.

The 6 horse had lost by a neck to the favorite in a mile race last time out. The 6 had been overtaken by the favorite after a two-length lead at the head of the stretch. The 6 had been 35/1. The favorite had been 9/2 in that race. Both were coming back in the same class. The favorite was adding two pounds, 116 to 118. The 6 still carried 116 but they had switched to a less popular jock, and also the distance was a mile and a 16th. The crowd figured that since the favorite had caught the 6 at a mile, then surely it would catch the 6 with the extra 16th of a mile to run. That seemed logical. But horse racing doesn't run to logic. Trainers enter their horses in what seems unfavorable conditions in order to keep the public money off the horse. The distance switch, plus the switch to a less popular jock all pointed to a gallop at a good price. I looked at the board. The morning line was 5. The board read 7 to 1.

"It's the 6 horse," I told Vi.

"No, that horse is a quitter," she said.

"Yeah," I said, then walked over and put 10 win on the 6.

The 6 took the lead out of the gate, hugged the rail around the first turn, then under an easy hold kept a length and a quarter lead down the backstretch. The pack followed. They figured the 6 would lead around the curve, then open up at the top of the stretch, and then they'd go after it. That was standard procedure. But the trainer had given the boy different instructions. At the top of the curve the boy let out the string and the horse leaped forward. Before the other jocks could get to their mounts, the 6 had a four-length lead. At the top of the stretch the boy gave the 6 a slight breather, looked back, then let it out again. I was looking good. Then the favorite, 9/5, came out of the pack and the son of a bitch was moving. It was eating up the lengths, driving. It looked like it was going to drive right past my horse. The favorite was the 2 horse. Halfway down the stretch, the 2 was a half length behind the 6, then the boy on the 6 went to the whip. The boy on the favorite *had* been whipping. They went the rest of the stretch that way, a half length apart, and that's what it was at the wire. I looked at the board. My horse had risen to 8 to 1.

We walked back to the bar.

"The best horse didn't win that race," said Vi.

"I don't care who's best. All I want is the front number. Order up."

We ordered.

"All right, smart boy. Let's see you get the next one."

"I tell you, baby, I am hell coming out of funerals."

She put that leg and breast up against me. I took a nip of scotch and opened the Form. Third race.

I looked it over. They were out to murder the crowd that day. The early foot had just won, so now the crowd was conscious of the speed horse and down on the stretch runners. The crowd only goes back one race in their memory. Part of it is caused by the 25 minute wait between races. All they can think of is what had just happened.

The third race was six furlongs. Now the speed horse, the early foot was the favorite. It had lost its last race by a nose at seven furlongs, holding the lead all the way down the stretch and losing in the last jump. The 8 horse was the closer. It had finished third, a length and a half behind the favorite, closing two lengths in the stretch. The crowd figured that if the 8 hadn't caught the favorite at seven furlongs, how in the hell could he catch it with a furlong less to go? The crowd always went home broke. The horse who had won the seven-furlong race wasn't in today's race.

"It's the 8 horse," I told Vi.

"The distance is too short. He'll never get up," said Vi.

The 8 horse was 6 on the line and read 9.

I collected from the last race, then put a 10 win on the 8 horse. If you bet too heavy your horse loses. Or you change your mind and get off your horse. Ten win was a nice comfortable bet.

The favorite looked good. It came out of the gate first, got the rail and opened up two lengths. The 8 was running wide, next to last, gradually moving in closer to the rail. The favorite still looked good at the top of the stretch. The boy took the 8 horse, now running fifth, wide, gave it a taste of the whip. Then the favorite began to shorten stride. It had gone the first quarter in 22 and 4/5, but it still had two lengths halfway down the stretch. Then the 8 horse just blew by, breezing, and won by two and a half lengths. I looked at the board. It still read 9 to 1.

We went back to the bar. Vi really laid her body against me.

I won three of the last five races. They only ran eight races in those days instead of nine. Anyhow, eight races was enough that day. I bought a couple of cigars and we got into my car. Vi had come out on the bus. I stopped for a fifth, then we went up to my place.

12

Vi looked around.

"What's a guy like you doing in a place like this?"

"That's what all the girls ask me."

"It's really a rat hole."

"It keeps me modest."

"Let's go to my place."

"O.K."

We got into my car and she told me where she lived.

We stopped for a couple of big steaks, vegetables, stuff for a salad, potatoes, bread, more to drink.

In the hallway of her apartment house there was a sign: **NO LOUD NOISE OR DISTURBANCE OF ANY KIND ALLOWED. TV SETS MUST BE OFF AT 10 P.M. WE HAVE WORKING PEOPLE HERE**.

It was a large sign done up in red paint.

"I like that part about the t.v. sets," I told her.

We took the elevator up. She did have a nice place. I carried the bags into the kitchen, found two glasses, poured two drinks.

"You get the stuff out. I'll be right back."

I pulled the stuff out, laid it on the sink. Had another drink. Vi came back. She was all dressed. Earrings, high heels, short skirt. She looked all right. Stocky. But good ass and thighs, breasts. A hard tough ride.

"Hello there," I said, "I'm a friend of Vi's. She said she'd be right back. Care for a drink?"

She laughed, then I grabbed that big body and gave her a kiss. Her lips were cold as diamonds but tasted good.

"I'm hungry," she said. "Let me cook!"

"I'm hungry too. I'll eat *you!*"

She laughed. I gave her a short kiss, grabbing her ass. Then I walked into the front room with my drink, sat down, stretched my legs, sighed.

I could stay here, I thought, make money at the track while she nurses me over the bad moments, rubs oils on my body, cooks for me, talks to me, goes to bed with me. Of course, there would always be arguments. That is the nature of Woman. They like the mutual exchange of dirty laundry, a bit of screaming, a bit of dramatics. Then an exchange of vows. I wasn't very good on the exchange of vows.

I was getting high. In my mind I'd already moved in.

Vi had everything going. She came out with her drink, sat on my lap, kissed me, putting her tongue into my mouth. My cock leaped up against her firm bottom. I grabbed a handful. Squeezed.

"I want to show you something," she said.

"I know you do but let's wait until about an hour after dinner."

"Oh, I don't mean that!"

I reached for her and gave her the tongue.

Vi got off my lap.

"No, I want to show you a photo of my daughter. She's in Detroit with my mother. But she's coming out here in the Fall to go to school."

"How old is she?"

"Six."

"And the father?"

"I divorced Roy. The son of a bitch was no good. All he did was drink and play the horses."

"Oh?"

She came back with the photo, put it in my hand. I tried to make it out. There was a dark background.

"Listen, Vi, she's really *black!* God damn, don't you have sense enough to take this with a light background?"

"It's from her father. The black dominates."

"Yeh. I can see that."

"My mother took the photo."

“I’m sure you have a nice daughter.”

“Yes, she is nice, really.”

Vi put the photo back and went into the kitchen. The eternal photo! Women with their photos. It was the same over and over and over again. Vi stood in the kitchen doorway.

“Don’t drink too much now! You know what we have to do!”

“Don’t worry, baby, I’ll have something for you. Meanwhile, bring me a drink! I’ve had a hard day. Half scotch, half water.”

“Get your own drink, bigshot.”

I turned my chair around, flicked on the t.v.

“You want another good day at the track, woman, you’d better bring Mr. Bigshot a drink. And I mean now!”

Vi had finally bet my horse in the last race. It was a 5/1 shot who hadn’t shown a decent race in two years. I bet it merely because it was 5/1 when it should have been 20. The horse had won by six lengths, eased up. They had that baby fixed from asshole to nostril.

I looked up and here was a hand with a drink reaching over my shoulder.

“Thanks, baby.”

“Yes, master,” she laughed.

13

In bed I had something in front of me but I couldn't do anything with it. I whaled and I whaled and I whaled. Vi was very patient. I kept striving and banging but I'd had too much to drink.

"Sorry, baby," I said. Then I rolled off. And went to sleep.

Then something awakened me. It was Vi. She had stoked me up and was riding topside.

"Go, baby, go!" I told her.

I arched my back now and then. She looked down at me with little greedy eyes. I was being raped by a high yellow enchantress! For a moment, it excited me.

Then I told her. "Shit. Get down, baby. It's been a long hard day. There will be a better time."

She climbed off. The thing went down like an express elevator.

14

In the morning I heard her walking around. She walked and she walked and she walked.

It was about 10:30 a.m. I was sick. I didn’t want to face her. Fifteen more minutes. Then I’d get out.

She shook me. “Listen, I want you to get out of here before my girlfriend shows!”

“So what? I’ll screw her too.”

“Yeah,” she laughed, “yeah.”

I got up. Coughed, gagged. Slowly got into my clothes.

“You make me feel like a wash-out,” I told her. *“I can’t* be that bad! There must be *some* good in me.”

I finally got dressed. I went to the bathroom and threw some water on my face, combed my hair. If I could only comb that face, I thought, but I can’t.

I came out.

“Vi.”

“Yes?”

“Don’t be too pissed. It wasn’t you. It was the booze. It has happened before.”

“All right, then, you shouldn’t drink so much. No woman likes to come in second to a bottle.”

“Why don’t you bet me to place then?”

“Oh, stop it!”

“Listen, you need any money, babe?” I reached into my wallet and took out a twenty. I handed it to her.

“My, you *are* sweet!”

Her hand touched my cheek, she kissed me gently along the side of the mouth. “Drive carefully now.”

“Sure, babe.”

I drove carefully all the way to the racetrack.

15

They had me in the counselor's office in one of the back rooms of the second floor.

"Let me see how you look, Chinaski." He looked at me.

"Ow! You look bad. I better take a pill." Sure enough, he opened a bottle and took one. "All right, Mr Chinaski, we'd like to know where you've been the last two days?"

"Mourning."

"Mourning? Mourning about what?"

"Funeral. Old friend. One day to pack in the stiff. One day to mourn."

"But you didn't phone in, Mr. Chinaski."

"Yeh."

"And I want to tell you something, Chinaski, off the record."

"All right."

"When you don't phone in, you know what you are saying?"

"No."

"Mr. Chinaski, you are saying, 'Fuck the post office!'"

"I am?"

"And, Mr. Chinaski, you know what that means?"

"No, what does it mean?"

"That means, Mr. Chinaski, that the post office is going to fuck *you!*"

Then he leaned back and looked at me.

"Mr. Feathers," I told him, "you can go to hell."

"Don't get fresh, Henry. I can make it tough on you."

"Please address me by my full name, sir. I ask for a simple bit of respect from you."

"You ask respect from me but …"

"That's right. We know where you park, Mr. Feathers."

"What? Is that a threat?"

"The blacks love me here, Feathers. I have fooled them."

"The blacks love you?"

"They give me water. I even fuck their women. Or try to."

"All right. This is getting out of hand. Please report back to your assignment."

He handed me my travel slip. He was worried, poor fellow. I hadn't fooled the blacks. I hadn't fooled anybody but Feathers. But you couldn't blame him for worrying. One supervisor had been pushed down the stairway. Another slashed across the ass. Another knifed in the belly as he was waiting in the crosswalk for the signal to change at 3 a.m. Right in front of the central post office. We never saw him again.

Feathers, soon after I spoke to him, bid out of the central office. I don't know exactly where he went. But it was out of the central office.

One morning about 10:00 the phone rang. "Mr. Chinaski?"

I recognized the voice and began to fondle myself.

"Ummmm," I said.

It was Miss Graves, that bitch.

"Were you asleep?"

"Yes, yes, Miss Graves, but go on. It's all right, it's all right."

"Well, you've made clearance."

"Ummm, ummm."

"So therefore we have notified the scheme room."

"Ummhmm."

"And you are scheduled to throw your CP1 two weeks from today."

"What? Now wait a minute …"

"That's all, Mr. Chinaski. Good day." She hung up.

17

Well, I took the scheme sheet and I related everything to sex and age. This guy lived in this house with three women. He belt-whipped one (her name was the name of the street and her age the break number); he ate another (ditto), and he simply screwed the third old-fashioned (ditto). There were all these fags and one of them (his name was Manfred Ave.) was 33 years old … etc., etc., etc.

I'm sure they wouldn't have let me into that glass cage if they had known what I was thinking as I looked at all those cards. They all looked like old friends to me.

Still, I got some of my orgies crossed. I threw a 94 the first time.

Ten days later, when I came back, I knew who was doing what to whom.

I threw 100 percent in five minutes.

And got a form letter of congratulations from the City Postmaster.

18

Soon after that I made regular and that gave me an eight-hour night, which beat 12, and pay for holidays. Of the 150 or 200 that had come in, there were only two of us left.

Then I met David Janko on the station. He was a young white in his early twenties. I made the mistake of talking to him, something about classical music. I happened to be up on my classical music because it was the only thing I could listen to while drinking beer in bed in the early morning. If you listen morning after morning you are bound to remember things. And when Joyce had divorced me I had mistakenly packed two volumes of *The Lives of the Classical and Modern Composers* into one of my suitcases. Most of these men's lives were so tortured that I enjoyed reading about them, thinking, well, I am in hell too and I can't even write music.

But I had opened my mouth. Janko and some other guy were arguing and I settled it by giving them Beethoven's birthdate, when he had penned the Third Symphony, and a generalized (if confused) idea of what the critics said about the Third.

It was too much for Janko. He immediately mistook me for a learned man. Sitting on the stool next to me he began to complain and rant, night after long night, about the misery buried deep in his twisted and pissed soul. He had a terribly loud voice and he wanted everybody to hear. I flipped the letters in, I listened and listened and listened, thinking what will I do now? How will I get this poor mad bastard to shut up?

I went home each night dizzy and sick. He was murdering me with the sound of his voice.

19

I began at 6:18 p.m. and Dave Janko did not begin until 10:36 p.m., so it could have been worse. Having a 10:06 thirty-minute lunch, I was usually back by the time he got in. In he'd come, looking for a stool next to mine. Janko, besides playing at the great mind also played at the great lover. According to him, he was trapped in hallways by beautiful young women, followed down the streets by them. They wouldn't let him rest, poor fellow. But I never saw him speak to women down at work, nor did they to him.

In he'd come: "HEY, HANK! MAN, I REALLY CAUGHT A HEAD JOB TODAY!"

He didn't speak, he screamed. He screamed all night.

"JESUS CHRIST, SHE REALLY ATE ME UP! AND YOUNG TOO! BUT SHE WAS REALLY A PRO!"

I lit a cigarette.

Then I had to hear all about how he met her—

"I HAD TO GO OUT FOR A LOAF OF BREAD, SEE?"

Then—down to the last detail—what she said, what he said, what they did, etc.

At that time, a law was passed requiring the post office to pay substitute clerks time and one half. So the post office shifted the overtime to the regular clerks.

Eight or ten minutes before my regular quitting time of 2:48 a.m. the intercom would come on: "Your attention, please! All regular clerks who reported at 6:18 p.m., are required to work one hour overtime!"

Janko would smile, lean forward and pour more of his poison into me.

Then, eight minutes before my ninth hour was up, the intercom would come on again.

“Your attention, please! All regular clerks who reported at 6:18 p.m., are required to work two hours overtime!”

Then eight minutes before my 10th hour:

“Your attention, please! All regular clerks who reported at 6:18 p.m., are required to work three hours overtime!”

Meanwhile Janko never stopped.

“I WAS SITTING IN THIS DRUGSTORE, YOU SEE. TWO CLASS BROADS CAME IN. ONE OF THEM SAT ON EACH SIDE OF ME …”

The boy was murdering me but I couldn’t find any way out. I remembered all the other jobs I had worked at. I had drawn the nut each time. They liked me.

Then Janko put his novel on me. He couldn’t type and had the thing typed up by a professional. It was enclosed in a fancy black leather notebook. The title was very romantic. “LET ME KNOW WHAT YOU THINK ABOUT IT,” he said.

“Yeh,” I said.

20

I took it home, opened the beer, got into bed and began.

It started well. It was about how Janko had lived in small rooms and starved while trying to find a job. He had trouble with the employment agencies. And there was a guy he met in a bar—he seemed like a very learned type-but his friend kept borrowing money from him which he never paid back.

It was honest writing.

Maybe I have misjudged this man, I thought.

I was hoping for him as I read. Then the novel fell apart. For some reason the moment he started writing about the post office, the thing lost reality.

The novel got worse and worse. It ended up with him being at the opera. It was intermission. He had left his seat in order to get away from the coarse and stupid crowd. Well, I was with him there. Then, rounding a pillar, it happened. It happened very quickly. He crashed into this cultured, dainty, beautiful thing. Almost knocked her down.

The dialogue went like this: “Oh, I’m *so* sorry!”

“It’s quite all right …”

“I didn’t mean to … you know … I’m sorry …!”

“Oh, I assure you, it’s all right!”

“But I mean, I didn’t see you … I didn’t mean to …”

“It’s all right. It’s quite all right …” The dialogue about the bumping went on for a page and a half.

The poor boy was truly mad.

It turned out this broad, although she’s wandering around among the pillars alone, well, she’s really married to this doctor, but the doc didn’t comprehend opera, or for that matter, didn’t even care for such simple things as Ravel’s *Bolero*.

Or even *The Three-Cornered Hat Dance* by de Falla. I was with the doc there.

From the bumping of these two true sensitive souls, something developed. They met at concerts and had a quickie afterwards. (This was *implied* rather than stated, for both of them were too delicate to simply *fuck.)*

Well, it ended. The poor beautiful creature loved her husband and she loved the hero (Janko). She didn't know what to do, so, of course, she committed suicide. She left both the doc and Janko standing in their bathrooms alone.

I told the kid, "It starts well. But you'll have to take out that bumping-around-the-pillar dialogue. It's very bad …"

"NO! EVERYTHING STAYS!"

The months went by and the novel kept coming back.

"JESUS CHRIST!" he said, "I CAN'T GO TO NEW YORK AND SHAKE THE HANDS OF THE PUBLISHERS!"

"Look, kid, why don't you quit this job? Go to a small room and write. Work it out."

"A GUY LIKE YOU CAN DO THAT," he said, "BECAUSE YOU LOOK LIKE A WINO. PEOPLE WILL HIRE YOU BECAUSE THEY FIGURE YOU CAN'T GET A JOB ANYWHERE ELSE AND YOU'LL STAY. THEY WON'T HIRE ME BECAUSE THEY LOOK AT ME AND THEY SEE HOW INTELLIGENT I AM AND THEY THINK, WELL, AN INTELLIGENT MAN LIKE HIM WON'T STAY WITH US, SO THERE'S NO USE HIRING HIM."

"I still say, go to a small room and write."

"BUT I NEED ASSURANCE!"

"It's a good thing a few others didn't think that way. It's a good thing Van Gogh didn't think that way."

"VAN GOGH'S BROTHER GAVE HIM FREE PAINTS!" the kid said to me.

FOUR

1

Then I developed a new system at the racetrack. I pulled in $3,000 in a month and a half while only going to the track two or three times a week. I began to dream. I saw a Little house down by the sea. I saw myself in fine clothing, calm, getting up mornings, getting into my imported car, making the slow easy drive to the track. I saw leisurely steak dinners, preceded and followed by good chilled drinks in colored glasses. The big tip. The cigar. And women as you wanted them. It's easy to fall into this kind of thinking when men hand you large bills at the cashier's window. When in one six-furlong race, say in a minute and nine seconds, you make a month's pay.

So I stood in the tour superintendent's office. There he was behind his desk. I had a cigar in my mouth and whiskey on my breath. I felt like money. I looked like money.

"Mr. Winters," I said, "the post office has treated me well. But I have outside business interests that simply must be taken care of. If you can't give me a leave of absence, I must resign."

"Didn't I give you a leave of absence earlier in the year, Chinaski?"

"No, Mr. Winters, you turned down my request for a leave of absence. This time there can't be any turndown. Or I will resign."

"All right, fill out the form and I'll sign it. But I can only give you 90 working days off."

"I'll take 'em," I said, exhaling a long trail of blue smoke from my expensive cigar.

2

The track had moved down the coast a hundred miles or so. I kept paying the rent on my apartment in town, got in my car and drove down. Once or twice a week I would drive back to the apartment, check the mail, maybe sleep overnight, then drive back down.

It was a good life, and I started winning. After the last race each night I would have one or two easy drinks at the bar, tipping the bartender well. It looked like a new life. I could do no wrong.

One night I didn't even watch the last race. I went to the bar.

Fifty dollars to win was my standard bet. After you bet 50 win awhile it feels like betting five or 10 win.

"Scotch and water," I told the barkeep. "Think I'll listen to this one over the speaker."

"Who you got?"

"Blue Stocking," I told him "50 win."

"Too much weight."

"Are you kidding? A good horse can pack 122 pounds in a six thousand dollar claimer. That means, according to the conditions, that the horse has done something that no other horse in that race has done."

Of course, that wasn't the reason I had bet Blue Stocking. I was always giving out misinformation. I didn't want anybody else on board.

At the time, they didn't have closed circuit t.v. You just listened to the calls. I was $380 ahead. A loss on the last race would give me a $330 profit. A good day's work.

We listened. The caller mentioned every horse in the race but Blue Stocking.

My horse must have fallen down, I thought.

They were in the stretch, coming down toward the wire. That track was notorious for its short stretch.

Then right before the race ended the announcer screamed, "AND HERE COMES BLUE STOCKING ON THE OUTSIDE! BLUE STOCKING IS GETTING UP! IT'S … BLUE STOCKING!"

"Pardon me," I told the bartender, "I'll be right back. Fix me a scotch and water, double shot."

"Yes, sir!" he said.

I went out back where they had a small tote board near the walking ring. Blue Stocking read 9/2. Well it wasn't eight or 10 to one. But you played the winner, not the price. I'd take the $250 profit plus change. I went back to the bar.

"Who do you like tomorrow, sir?" asked the barkeep.

"Tomorrow's a long way off," I told him.

I finished my drink, tipped him a dollar and walked off.

3

Every night was about the same. I'd drive along the coast looking for a place to have dinner. I wanted an expensive place that wasn't too crowded. I developed a nose for those places. I could tell by looking at them from the outside. You couldn't always get a table directly overlooking the ocean unless you wanted to wait. But you could still see the ocean out there and the moon, and let yourself get romantic. Let yourself enjoy life. I always asked for a small salad and a big steak. The waitresses smiled deliciously and stood very close to you. I had come a long way from a guy who had worked in slaughterhouses, who had crossed the country with a railroad track gang, who had worked in a dog biscuit factory, who had slept on park benches, who had worked the nickle and dime jobs in a dozen cities across the nation.

After dinner I would look for a motel. This also took a bit of driving. First I'd stop somewhere for whiskey and beer. I avoided the places with t.v. sets. It was clean sheets, a hot shower, luxury. It was a magic life. And I did not tire of it.

4

One day I was at the bar between races and I saw this woman. God or somebody keeps creating women and tossing them out on the streets, and this one's ass is too big and that one's tits are too small, and this one is mad and that one is crazy and that one is a religionist and that one reads tea leaves and this one can't control her farts, and that one has this big nose, and that one has boney legs …

But now and then, a woman walks up, full blossom, a woman just bursting out of her dress … a sex creature, a curse, the end of it all. I looked up and there she was, down at the end of the bar. She was about drunk and the bartender wouldn't serve her and she began to bitch and they called one of the track cops and the track cop had her by the arm, leading her off, and they were talking.

I finished my drink and followed them.

"Officer! Officer!" He stopped and looked at me. "Has my wife done something wrong?" I asked. "We believe that she is intoxicated, sir. I was going to escort her to the gate."

"The starting gate?" He laughed. "No, sir. The exit gate."

"I'll take over here, officer."

"All right, sir. But see that she doesn't drink anymore." I didn't answer. I took her by the arm and led her back in.

"Thank god, you saved my life," she said.

Her flank bumped against me.

"It's all right. My name's Hank."

"I'm Mary Lou," she said.

"Mary Lou," I said, "I love you."

She laughed.

"By the way, you don't hide behind pillars at the opera house, do you?"

"I don't hide behind anything," she said, sticking her breasts out.

"Want another drink?"

"Sure, but he won't serve me."

"There's more than one bar at this track, Mary Lou. Let's take a run upstairs. And keep quiet. Stand back and I will bring your drink to you. What're you drinking?"

"Anything," she said.

"Scotch and water do?"

"Sure."

We drank the rest of the card. She brought me luck. I hit two of the last three.

"Did you bring a car?" I asked her.

"I came with some damn fool," she said. "Forget him."

"If you can, I can," I told her.

We wrapped up in the car and her tongue flicked in and out of my mouth like a tiny lost snake. We unwrapped and I drove down the coast. It was a lucky night. I got a table overlooking the ocean and we ordered drinks and waited for the steaks. Everybody in the place looked at her. I leaned forward and lit her cigarette, thinking, this one's going to be a good one. Everybody in the place knew what I was thinking and Mary Lou knew what I was thinking, and I smiled at her over the flame.

"The ocean," I said, "look at it out there, battering, crawling up and down. And underneath all that, the fish, the poor fish fighting each other, eating each other. We're like those fish, only we're up here. One bad move and you're finished. It's nice to be a champion. It's nice to know your moves."

I took out a cigar and lit it.

"'nother drink, Mary Lou?"

"All right, Hank."

5

There was this place. It stretched over the sea, it was built over the sea. An old place, but with a touch of class. We got a room on the first floor. You could hear the ocean running down there, you could hear the waves, you could *smell* the ocean, you could feel the tide going in and out, in and out.

I took my time with her as we talked and drank. Then I went over to the couch and sat next to her. We worked something up, laughing and talking and listening to the ocean. I stripped down but made her keep her clothes on.

Then I carried her over to the bed and while crawling all over her, I finally worked her clothing off and I was in. It was hard getting in. Then she gave way.

It was one of the best. I heard the water, I heard the tide going in and out. It was as if I were coming with the whole ocean. It seemed to last and last. Then I rolled off.

“Oh Jesus Christ,” I said, “Oh Jesus Christ!”

I don’t know how Jesus Christ always got into such things.

6

The next day we picked up some of her stuff at this motel. There was a little dark guy in there with a wart on the side of his nose. He looked dangerous.

"You going with him?" he asked Mary Lou.

"Yes."

"All right. Luck." He lit a cigarette. "Thanks, Hector."

Hector? What the hell kind of name was that? "Care for a beer?" he asked me. "Sure," I said.

Hector was sitting on the edge of the bed. He went into the kitchen and got three beers. It was good beer, imported from Germany. He opened Mary Lou's bottle, poured some of the bottle into a glass for her. Then he asked me: "Glass?"

"No, thanks."

I got up and switched bottles with him. We sat drinking the beer in silence.

Then he said, "You're man enough to take her away from me?"

"Hell, I don't know. It's her choice. If she wants to stay with you, she'll stay. Why don't you ask her?"

"Mary Lou, will you stay with me?"

"No," she said, "I'm going with him."

She pointed at me. I felt important. I had lost so many women to so many other guys that it felt good for the thing to be working the other way around. I lit a cigar. Then I looked around for an ashtray. I saw one on the dresser.

I happened to look into the mirror to see how hungover I was and I saw him coming at me like a dart toward a dart-board. I still had the beerbottle in my hand. I swung and he walked right into it. I got him in the mouth. His whole mouth was broken teeth and blood. Hector dropped to his knees, crying, holding his mouth with both hands. I saw the stiletto. I kicked the stiletto away from him with my foot, picked it up, looked at it. Nine inches. I hit the button and the blade dropped back in. I put the thing in my pocket.

Then as Hector was crying I walked up and booted him in the ass. He sprawled flat on the floor, still crying. I walked over, took a pull at his beer.

Then I walked over and slapped Mary Lou. She screamed.

"Cunt! You set this up, didn't you? You'd let this monkey kill me for the lousy four or five hundred bucks in my wallet!"

"No, no!" she said. She was crying. They both were crying.

I slapped her again.

"Is that how you make it, cunt? Killing men for a couple hundred?"

"No, no, I LOVE you, Hank, I LOVE you!"

I grabbed that blue dress by the neck and ripped one side of it down to her waist. She didn't wear a brassiere. The bitch didn't need one.

I walked out of there, got outside and drove toward the track. For two or three weeks I was looking over my shoulder. I was jumpy. Nothing happened. I never saw Mary Lou at the racetrack again. Or Hector.

7

Somehow the money slipped away after that and soon I left the track and sat around in my apartment waiting for the 90 day leave to run out. My nerves were raw from the drinking and the action. It's not a new story about how women descend upon a man. You think you have space to breathe, then you look up and there's another one. A few days after returning to work, there was another one. Fay. Fay had grey hair and always dressed in black. She said she was protesting the war. But if Fay wanted to protest the war, that was all right with me. She was a writer of some sort and went to a couple of writers' workshops. She had ideas about Saving the World. If she could Save it for me, that would be all right too. She had been living off alimony checks from a former husband—they had had three children—and her mother also sent money now and then. Fay had not had more than one or two jobs in her life.

Meanwhile Janko had a new load of bullshit. He sent me home each morning with my head aching. At the time I was getting numerous traffic citations. It seemed that everytime I looked into the rear view mirror there were the red lights. A squad car or a bike.

I got to my place late one night. I was really beat.

Getting that key out and into the door was about the last of me. I walked into the bedroom and there was Fay in bed reading *The New Yorker* and eating chocolates. She didn't even say hello.

I walked into the kitchen and looked for something to eat. There was nothing in the refrigerator. I decided to pour myself a glass of water. I walked to the sink. It was stopped-up with garbage. Fay liked to save empty jars and jar lids. The dirty dishes filled half the sink and on top of the water, along with a few paper plates, floated these jars and jar lids.

I walked back into the bedroom just as Fay was putting a chocolate in her mouth.

“Look, Fay,” I said, “I know you want to save the world. But can’t you start in the kitchen?”

“Kitchens aren’t important,” she said.

It was difficult to hit a woman with grey hair so I just went into the bathroom and let the water run into the tub. A burning bath might cool the nerves. When the tub was full I was afraid to get into it. My sore body had, by then, stiffened to such an extent that I was afraid I might drown in there.

I went into the front room and after an effort I managed to get out of my shirt, pants, shoes, stockings. I walked into the bedroom and climbed into bed next to Fay. I couldn’t get settled. Every time I moved, it cost me.

The only time you are alone, Chinaski, I thought, is when you are driving to work or driving back.

I finally worked my way to a position on my stomach. I ached all over. Soon I’d be back on the job. If I could manage to sleep, it would help. Every now and then I could hear a page turn, the sound of chocolates being eaten. It had been one of her writers’ workshop nights. If she would only turn out the lights.

“How was the workshop?” I asked from my belly.

“I’m worried about Robby.”

“Oh,” I asked, “what’s wrong?”

Robby was a guy nearing 40 who had lived with his mother all his life. All he wrote, I was told, were terribly funny stories about the Catholic Church. Robby really laid it to the Catholics. The magazines just weren’t ready for Robby, although he had been printed once in a Canadian journal. I had seen Robby once on one of my nights off. I drove Fay up to this mansion where they all read their stuff to each other. “Oh! There’s Robby!” Fay had said, “he writes these very funny stories about the Catholic Church!”

She had pointed. Robby had his back to us. His ass was wide and big and soft; it hung in his slacks. Can't they see that? I thought.

"Won't you come in?" Fay had asked.

"Maybe next week …"

Fay put another chocolate into her mouth.

"Robby's worried. He lost his job on the delivery truck. He says he can't write without a job. He needs a feeling of security. He says he won't be able to write until he finds another job."

"Oh hell," I said, "I can get him another job."

"Where? How?"

"They are hiring down at the post office, right and left. The pay's not bad."

"THE POST OFFICE! ROBBY'S TOO SENSITIVE TO WORK AT THE POST OFFICE!"

"Sorry," I said, "thought it was worth a try. Good night."

Fay didn't answer me. She was angry.

8

I had Fridays and Saturdays off, which made Sunday the roughest day. Plus the fact that on Sunday they made me report at 3:30 p.m. instead of my usual 6:18 p.m.

This Sunday I went in and they put me in the station papers section, as usual per Sundays, and this meant at *least* eight hours on my feet.

Besides the pains, I was beginning to suffer from dizzy spells. Everything would whirl, I would come very close to blacking out, then I would grab myself.

It had been a brutal Sunday. Some friends of Fay's had come over and sat on the couch and chirped, how they were really great writers, really the best in the nation. The only reason they didn't get published was that they didn't—they said—send their stuff out.

I had looked at them. If they wrote the way they looked, drinking their coffee and giggling and dipping their doughnuts, it didn't matter if they sent it out or jammed it.

I was sticking in the magazines this Sunday. I needed coffee, two coffees, a bite to eat. But all the soups were standing out front. I hit out the back way. I had to get straight. The cafeteria was on the second floor. I was on the fourth. There was a doorway down by the men's crapper. I looked at the sign.

WARNING!

DO NOT USE THIS

STAIRWAY!

It was a con. I was wiser than those mothers. They just put the sign up to keep clever guys like Chinaski from going down to the cafeteria. I opened the door and went on down. The door closed behind me. I walked down to the second floor. Turned the knob. What the fuck! The door wouldn't open! It was locked. I walked back up. Past the third floor door. I didn't try it. I knew it was locked. As the first floor door was locked. I knew the post office well enough by then. When they laid a trap, they were thorough. I had one slim chance. I was at the fourth floor. I tried the knob. It was locked.

At least the door was near the men's crapper. There was always somebody going in and out of the men's crapper. I waited. Ten minutes. Fifteen minutes. Twenty minutes! Didn't ANYBODY want to shit, piss or goof-off? Twenty-five minutes. Then I saw a face. I tapped on the glass.

"Hey, buddy! HEY, BUDDY!"

He didn't hear me, or pretended not to hear me. He marched into the crapper. Five minutes. Then another face came by.

I rapped hard. "HEY, BUDDY! HEY. YOU COCK-SUCKER!"

I guess he heard me. He looked at me from behind the wired glass.

I said, "OPEN THE DOOR! CAN'T YOU SEE ME IN HERE? I'M LOCKED IN, YOU FOOL! OPEN THE DOOR!"

He opened the door. I went in. The guy was in a trance-like state.

I squeezed his elbow.

"Thanks, kid."

I walked back to the magazine case. Then the soup walked past. He stopped and looked at me. I slowed down.

"How are you doing, Mr. Chinaski?"

I growled at him, waved a magazine in the air as if I were going insane, said something to myself, and he walked on.

9

Fay was pregnant. But it didn't change her and it didn't change the post office either.

The same clerks did all the work while the miscellaneous crew stood around and argued about sports. They were all big black dudes—built like professional wrestlers. Whenever a new one came into the service he was tossed into the miscellaneous crew. This kept them from murdering the supervisors. If the miscellaneous crew had a supervisor you never saw him. The crew brought in truckloads of mail that arrived via freight elevator. This was a five minute on the hour job. Sometimes they counted the mail, or pretended to. They looked very calm and intellectual, making their counts with long pencils behind one ear. But most of the time they argued the sports scene violently. They were all experts—they read the same sports writers.

"All right, man, what's your all time outfield?"

"Well, Willie Mays, Ted Williams, Cobb."

"What? What?"

"That's right, baby!"

"What about the Babe? Whatta ya gonna do with the Babe?"

"O.K., O.K., who's your all star outfield?"

"All time, not all star!"

"O.K., O.K., you know what I mean, baby, you know what I mean!"

"Well, I'll take Mays, Ruth and Di Maj!"

"Both you guys are nuts! How about Hank Aaron, Baby? How about Hank?"

At one time, all miscellaneous jobs were put on bid. Bids were filled mostly on a basis of seniority. The miscellaneous crew went about and ripped the bids out of the order books. Then they had nothing to do. Nobody filed a complaint. It was a long dark walk to the parking lot at night.

10

I began getting dizzy spells. I could feel them coming. The case would begin to whirl. The spells lasted about a minute. I couldn't understand it. Each letter was getting heavier and heavier. The clerks began to have that dead grey look. I began to slide off my stool. My legs would barely hold me up. The job was killing me.

I went to my doctor and told him about it. He took my blood pressure.

"No, no, your blood pressure is all right."

Then he put the stethoscope to me and weighed me.

"I can find nothing wrong."

Then he gave me a special blood test. He took blood from my arm three times at intervals, each time lapse longer than the last.

"Do you care to wait in the other room?"

"No, no. I'll go out and walk around and come back in time."

"All right but come back in time."

I was on time for the second blood extraction. Then there was a longer wait for the third one, 20 or 25 minutes. I walked out on the street. Nothing much was happening. I went into a drugstore and read a magazine. I put it down, looked at the clock and went outside. I saw this woman sitting at the bus stop. She was one of those rare ones. She was showing plenty of leg. I couldn't keep my eyes off her. I crossed the street and stood about 20 yards away.

Then she got up. I had to follow her. That big ass beckoned me. I was hypnotized. She walked into a post office and I walked in behind her. She stood in a long line and I stood behind her. She got two postcards. I bought 12 airmail postcards and two dollars worth of stamps.

When I came out she was getting on the bus. I saw the last of that delicious leg and ass get on the bus and the bus carried her away.

The doctor was waiting.

"What happened? You're five minutes late!"

"I don't know. The clock must have been wrong."

"THIS THING MUST BE EXACT!"

"Go ahead. Take the blood anyhow."

He stuck the needle into me …

A couple of days later, the tests said there was nothing wrong with me. I didn't know if it was the five minutes difference or what. But the dizzy spells got worse. I began to clock out after four hours work without filling out the proper forms.

I'd walk in around 11 p.m. and there would be Fay. Poor pregnant Fay.

"What happened?"

"I couldn't take any more," I'd say, "too sensitive…"

11

The boys on Dorsey station didn't know my problems. I'd enter through the back way each night, hide my sweater in a tray and walk in to get my timecard: "Brothers and sisters!" I'd say. "Brother, Hank!"

"Hello, Brother Hank!"

We had a game going, the black-white game and they liked to play it. Boyer would walk up to me, touch me on the arm and say, "Man, if I had *your* paint job I'd be a millionaire!"

"Sure you would, Boyer. That's all it takes: a white skin."

Then round little Hadley would walk up to us.

"There used to be this black cook on this ship. He was the only black man aboard. He cooked tapioca pudding two or three times a week and then jacked-off into it. Those white boys really liked his tapioca pudding, hehehehe! They asked him how he made it and he said he had his own secret recipe, hehehehehehe!"

We all laughed. I don't know how many times I had to hear the tapioca pudding story …

"Hey, poor white trash! Hey, boy!"

"Look, man, if I called you 'boy' you might draw steel on me. So don't call me 'boy.' "

"Look, white man, what do you say we go out together this Saturday night? I got me a nice white gal with blonde hair. "

"And I got myself a nice black gal. And you know what color her hair is."

"You guys been fucking our women for centuries. We're trying to catch up. You don't mind if I stick my big black dick into your white gal?"

"If she wants it she can have it."

"You stole the land from the Indians."

“Sure I did.”

“You won’t invite me to your house. If you do, you’ll ask me to come in the back way, so no one will see my skin …”

“But I’ll leave a small light burning.”

It got boring but there was no way out.

12

Fay was all right with the pregnacy. For an old gal, she was all right. We waited around at our place. Finally the time came.

"It won't be long," she said. "I don't want to get there too early."

I went out and checked the car. Came back.

"Oooh, oh," she said. "No, wait."

Maybe she *could* save the world. I was proud of her calm. I forgave her for the dirty dishes and *The New Yorker* and her writers' workshop. The old gal was only another lonely creature in a world that didn't care.

"We better go now," I said.

"No," said Fay, "I don't want to make you wait too long. I know you haven't been feeling well."

"To hell with me. Let's make it."

"No, please, Hank."

She just sat there.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"Nothing."

She sat there 10 minutes. I went into the kitchen for a glass of water. When I came out she said, "You ready to drive?"

"Sure."

"You know where the hospital is?"

"Of course."

I helped her into the car. I had made two practice runs the week earlier. But when we got there I had no idea where to park. Fay pointed up a runway.

"Go in there. Park in there. We'll go in from there."

"Yes, ma'am," I said …

She was in bed in a back room overlooking the street. Her face grimaced. "Hold my hand," she said. I did.

"Is it really going to happen?" I asked.

"Yes."

"You make it seem so easy," I said. "You're so very nice. It helps."

"I'd like to *be* nice. It's that god damned post office …"

"I know. I know."

We were looking out the back window.

I said, "Look at those people down there. They have no idea what is going on up here. They just walk on the sidewalk. Yet, it's funny … they were once born themselves, each one of them."

"Yes, it is funny. "

I could feel the movements of her body through her hand.

"Hold tighter," she said. "Yes."

"I'll hate it when you go."

"Where's the doctor? Where is everybody? What the hell!"

"They'll be here."

Just then a nurse walked in. It was a Catholic hospital and she was a very handsome nurse, dark, Spanish or Portuguese.

"You … must go … now," she told me.

I gave Fay crossed fingers and a twisted smile. I don't think she saw. I took the elevator downstairs.

13

My German doctor walked up. The one who had given me the blood tests.

"Congratulations," he said, shaking my hand, "it's a girl. Nine pounds, three ounces."

"And the mother?"

"The mother will be all right. She was no trouble at all."

"When can I see them?"

"They'll let you know. Just sit there and they'll call you."

Then he was gone.

I looked through the glass. The nurse pointed down at my child. The child's face was very red and it was screaming louder than any of the other children. The room was full of screaming babies. So many births! The nurse seemed very proud of my baby. At least, I hoped it was mine. She picked the girl up so I could see it better. I smiled through the glass, I didn't know how to act. The girl just screamed at me. Poor thing, I thought, poor little damned thing. I didn't know then that she would be a beautiful girl someday who would look just like me, hahaha.

I motioned the nurse to put the child down, then waved goodbye to both of them. She was a nice nurse. Good legs, good hips. Fair breasts.

Fay had a spot of blood on the left side of her mouth and I took a wet cloth and wiped it off. Women were meant to suffer; no wonder they asked for constant declarations of love.

"I wish they'd give me my baby," said Fay, "it's not right to separate us like this."

"I know. But I guess there's some medical reason."

"Yes, but it doesn't seem right."

"No, it doesn't. But the child looked fine. I'll do what I can to make them send up the child as soon as possible. There must have been 40 babies down there. They're making all the mothers wait. I guess it's to let them get their strength back. Our baby looked *very* strong, I assure you. Please don't worry."

"I'd be so happy with my baby."

"I know, I know. It won't be long."

"Sir," a fat Mexican nurse walked up, "I'll have to ask you to leave now."

"But I'm the father."

"We know. But your wife must rest."

I squeezed Fay's hand, kissed her on the forehead. She closed her eyes and seemed to sleep then. She was not a young woman. Maybe she hadn't saved the world but she had made a major improvement. Ring one up for Fay.

14

Marina Louise, Fay named the child. So there it was, Marina Louise Chinaski. In the crib by the window. Looking up at the tree leafs and bright designs whirling on the ceiling. Then she'd cry. Walk the baby, talk to the baby. The girl wanted mama's breasts but mama wasn't always ready and I didn't have mama's breasts. And the job was still there. And now riots. One tenth of the city was on fire …

15

On the elevator up, I was the only white man there. It seemed strange. They talked about the riots, not looking at me.

“Jesus,” said a coal black guy, “it’s really something. These guys walking around the streets drunk with fifths of whiskey in their hands. Cops driving by but the cops don’t get out of their cars, they don’t bother the drunks. It’s daylight. People walking around with t.v. sets, vacuum cleaners, all that. It’s really something …”

“Yeah, man.”

“The black-owned places put up signs, ‘BLOOD BROTHERS.’ And the white-owned places too. But they can’t fool the people. They know which places belong to Whitey …”

“Yeah, brother.”

Then, the elevator stopped at the fourth floor and we all got off together. I felt that it was best for me not to make any comment at that time.

Not much later the postmaster of the city came on over the intercoms; “Attention! The southeast area has been barricaded. Only those with proper identification will be allowed through. There is a 7 p.m. curfew. After 7 p.m. nobody will be allowed to pass. The barricade extends from Indiana Street to Hoover Street, and from Washington Boulevard to 135th Place. Anybody living in this area is excused from work now.”

I got up and reached for my timecard.

“Hey! Where you going?” the supervisor asked me.

“You heard the announcement?”

“Yeah, but you’re not—”

I slipped my left hand into my pocket.

“I’m not WHAT? I’m not WHAT?”

He looked at me.

"What do *you* know, WHITEY?" I said.
I took my timecard, walked over and punched out.

16

The riots ended, the baby calmed down, and I found ways to avoid Janko. But the dizzy spells persisted. The doctor wrote me a standing order for the green-white librium capsules and they helped a bit.

One night I got up to get a drink of water. Then I came back, worked 30 minutes and took my 10-minute break.

When I sat down again, Chambers the supervisor, a high yellow, came running up: "Chinaski! You've finally hung yourself! You've been gone 40 minutes!"

Chambers had fallen on the floor in a fit one night, frothing and twitching. They had carried him out on a stretcher. The next night he had come back, necktie, new shirt, as if nothing had happened. Now he was pulling the old water fountain game on me.

"Look, Chambers, try to be sensible. I got a drink of water, sat down, worked 30 minutes, then took my break. I was gone 10 minutes."

"You've hung yourself, Chinaski! You've been gone 40 minutes! I have seven witnesses!"

"Seven witnesses?"

"YES, seven!"

"I tell you, it was 10 minutes."

"No, we've got you, Chinaski! We've really got you this time!"

Then, I was tired of it. I didn't want to look at him anymore:

"All right, then. I've been gone 40 minutes. Have your way. Write it up."

Chambers ran off.

I stuck a few more letters, then the general foreman walked up. A thin white man with little tufts of grey hair hanging over each ear. I looked at him and then turned and stuck some more letters.

"Mr. Chinaski, I'm sure that you understand the rules and regulations of the post office. Each clerk is allowed two 10-minute breaks, one before lunch, the other after lunch. The break privilege is granted by management: 10 minutes. Ten minutes is—"

"GOD DAMN IT!" I threw my letters down. "Now I admitted to a 40-minute break just to satisfy you guys and get you off my ass. But you keep coming around! Now I take it back! I only took 10 minutes! I want to see your seven witnesses! Trot them out!"

Two days later I was at the racetrack. I looked up and saw all these teeth, this big smile and the eyes shining, friendly. What was it—with all those teeth? I looked closer. It was Chambers looking at me, smiling and standing in a coffee line. I had a beer in my hand. I walked over to a trashcan, and still looking at him, I spit. Then I walked off. Chambers never bothered me again.

17

The baby was crawling, discovering the world. Marina slept in bed with us at night. There was Marina, Fay, the cat and myself. The cat slept on the bed too. Look here, I thought, I have three mouths depending on me. How very strange. I sat there and watched them sleeping.

Then two nights in a row when I came home in the mornings, the early mornings, Fay was sitting up reading the classified sections.

“All these rooms are so damned expensive,” she said.

“Sure,” I said.

The next night I asked her as she read the paper: “Are you moving out?”

“Yes.”

“All right. I’ll help you find a place tomorrow. I’ll drive you around.”

I agreed to pay her a sum each month. She said, “All right.”

Fay got the girl. I got the cat.

We found a place eight or 10 blocks away. I helped her move in, said goodbye to the girl and drove on back.

I went over to see Marina two or three or four times a week. I knew as long as I could see the girl I would be all right.

Fay was still wearing black to protest the war. She attended local peace demonstrations, love-ins, went to poetry readings, workshops, communist party meetings, and sat in a hippie coffee house. She took the child with her. If she wasn’t out she was sitting in a chair smoking cigarette after cigarette and reading. She wore protest buttons on her black blouse. But she was usually off somewhere with the girl when I drove over to visit.

I finally found them in one day. Fay was eating sunflower seeds with yogurt. She baked her own bread but it wasn't very good.

"I met Andy, this truckdriver," she told me. "He paints on the side. That's one of his paintings." Fay pointed to the wall.

I was playing with the girl. I looked at the painting. I didn't say anything.

"He has a big cock," said Fay. "He was over the other night and he asked me, 'How would you like to be fucked with a big cock?' and I told him, 'I would rather be fucked with love!'"

"He sounds like a man of the world," I told her.

I played with the girl a little more, then left. I had a scheme test coming up.

Soon after, I got a letter from Fay. She and the child were living in a hippie commune in New Mexico. It was a nice place, she said. Marina would be able to breathe there. She enclosed a little drawing the girl had made for me.

FIVE

1

POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT

SUBJECT: Letter of Warning TO: Mr. Henry Chinaski

Information has been received in this office indicating that you were arrested by the Los Angeles Police Department on March 12, 1969, on a drunk charge.

In this connection, your attention is invited to Section 744.12 of the Postal Manual, as follows:

"Postal employees are servants of the general public and their conduct, in many instances, must be subject to more restrictions and to higher standards than may be for certain private employments. Employees are expected to conduct themselves during and outside of working hours in a manner which will reflect favorably upon the Postal Service. Although it is not the policy of the Post Office Department to interfere with the private lives of employees, it does require that Postal personnel be honest, reliable, trustworthy, and of good character and reputation."

While your arrest was on a relatively minor charge, it constitutes evidence of your failure to conduct yourself as required in a manner which will reflect favorably upon the Postal Service. You are hereby cautioned and warned that a repetition of this offense or other involvement with police authorities will leave this office no alternative but to consider disciplinary action.

You may submit your written explanation in this matter if you wish to do so.

2

POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT

SUBJECT: Notice of Proposed Adverse Action TO: Mr. Henry Chinaski

This is advance notice that it is proposed to suspend you from duty without pay for three (3) days or to take such other disciplinary action as may be determined to be appropriate. The proposed action is considered to be for such cause as will promote the efficiency of the service and will be effected no sooner than 35 calendar days from the receipt of this letter.

The charge against you and the reasons supporting the charge are:

CHARGE NO. 1

You are charged with being absent without leave on May 13, 1969, May 14, 1969, and May 15, 1969.

In addition to the above, the following element of your past record will be considered in determining the extent of disciplinary action should the current charge be sustained: You were issued a letter of warning April 1, 1969, for being absent without leave.

You have a right to answer the charge in person or in writing, or both, and to be accompanied by a representative of your own choosing. Your reply is to be made within ten (10) calendar days of the receipt of this letter. You may also submit affidavits in support of your answer. Any written reply should be directed to the Postmaster, Los Angeles, California 90052. If additional time is needed within which to submit your reply, it will be considered upon written application showing the necessity.

If you wish to reply in person, you may make an appointment with Ellen Normell, Chief, Employment and Services Section, or K. T. Shamus, Employee Services Officer, by telephoning 289-2222.

After the expiration of the 10-day time limit for reply, all of the facts in your case, including any reply you may submit, will be given full consideration before a decision is rendered. A decision in writing will be issued to you. If the decision is adverse, the letter of decision will advise you of the reason, or reasons, relied upon in making the decision.

3

POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT
SUBJECT: Notice of Decision
TO: Henry Chinaski

This will refer to the letter addressed to you dated August 17, 1969, proposing your suspension without pay for three days or other disciplinary action, based on Charge No. 1 specified therein. To date no reply has been received to that letter. After careful consideration of the charge, it has been decided that Charge No. 1, which is supported by substantial evidence, is sustained and warrants your suspension. Accordingly, you will be suspended from duty without pay for a period of three (3) days.

Your first day of suspension will be November 17, 1969, and your last day of suspension will be November 19, 1969.

The element of your past record, as set forth in detail in the letter of proposed adverse action, was also considered in deciding upon the penalty to be imposed.

You have the right to appeal this decision either to the Post Office Department or to the U.S. Civil Service Commission, or first to the Post Office Department and then to the Civil Service Department and then to the Civil Service Commission, in accordance with the following:

> If you appeal first to the Civil Service Commission, you will have no right to appeal to the Post Office Department. An appeal to the Civil Service Commission must be submitted to the Regional Director, San Francisco Region, U.S. Civil Service Commission, 450 Golden Gate Avenue, Box 36010, San Francisco, California 94102. Your appeal must (a) be in writing, (b) set forth your reasons for contesting the suspension, with such offer of proof and documents as you are able to submit, and (c) be submitted no later than 15 days after the effective date of your suspension. The Commission will upon proper appeal, review the action only to determine that proper procedures have been

> followed, unless you furnish an affidavit alleging that the action is for political reasons, except as may be required by law, or resulted from discrimination because of marital status or physical handicap. If you appeal to the Post Office Department, you will not be entitled to appeal to the Commission until after a first level decision has been made on your appeal by the Department. At that point, you will have a choice of continuing with your appeal through higher levels in the Post Office Department or appealing to the Commission. However, if no first level decision on the appeal has been made within 60 days after it is filed, you may elect to terminate your appeal to the Department by appealing to the Commission.
>
> If you appeal to the Post Office Department within ten (10) calendar days of receiving this notice of decision, your suspension will not be put into effect until you have received a decision on your appeal from the Regional Director, Post Office Department. Further, if you appeal to the Department, you have the right to be accompanied, represented, and advised by a representative of your own choosing. You and your representative will have freedom from restraint, interference, coercion, discrimination, or reprisal. You and your representative will also be allowed a reasonable amount of official time to prepare your presentation.
>
> An appeal to the Post Office Department may be submitted at any time after you receive this letter but not later than 15 calendar days after the effective date of the suspension. Your letter must include a request for a hearing or a statement that no hearing is desired. The appeal should be addressed to:
>
> Regional Director
> Post Office Department
> 631 Howard Street
> San Francisco, California
> 94106

If you file an appeal with either the Regional Director or with the Civil Service Commission, furnish me with a signed copy of the appeal at the same time it is sent to the Region or Civil Service Commission.

If you have any questions about the appeals procedure, you may contact Richard N. Marth, Employee Services and Benefits Assistant, at the Employment and Services Section, Office of Personnel, Room 2205, Federal Building, 300 North Los Angeles Street, between 8:30 a.m. and 4 p.m., Monday through Friday.

4

POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT
SUBJECT: Notice of Proposed Adverse Action
TO: Mr. Henry Chinaski

This is advance notice that it is proposed to remove you from the Postal Service or to take such other disciplinary action as may be determinted to be appropriate. The proposed action is considered to be for such cause as will promote the efficiency of the service and will be effective no sooner than 35 calendar days from the receipt of this letter.

The charge against you and the reasons supporting the charge are: You are charged with being absent without leave on the following dates:

September	25, 1969	4 hrs
September	28, 1969	8 hrs
September	29, 1969	8 hrs
October	5, 1969	8 hrs
October	6, 1969	4 hrs
October	7, 1969	4 hrs
October	13, 1969	5 hrs
October	15, 1969	4 hrs
October	16, 1969	8 hrs
October	19, 1969	8 hrs
October	23, 1969	4 hrs
October	29, 1969	4 hrs
November	4, 1969	8 hrs
November	6, 1969	4 hrs
November	12, 1969	4 hrs

November 13, 1969 8 hrs

In addition to the above, the following elements of your past record will be considered in determining the extent of disciplinary action should the current charge be sustained:

You were issued a letter of warning April 1, 1969, for being absent without leave.

You were issued a notice of proposed adverse action August 17, 1969, for being absent without leave. As a result of that charge you were suspended from duty without pay for three (3) days from November 17, 1969 to November 19, 1969.

You have the right to answer the charge in person or in writing, or both, and to be accompanied by a representative of your own choosing. Your reply is to be made within ten (10) calendar days of the receipt of this letter. You may also submit affidavits in support of your letters. Any written reply should be directed to the Postmaster, Los Angeles, California 90052. If additional time is needed within which to submit your reply, it will be considered upon written application showing the necessity.

If you wish to reply in person, you may make an appointment with Ellen Normell, Chief, Employment and Services Section, or K. T. Shamus, Employee Services Officer, by telephoning 289-2222.

After the expiration of the 10-day limit for reply, all the facts in your case, including any reply you may submit, will be given full consideration before a decision is rendered. A decision in writing will be issued to you. If the decsion is adverse, the letter of decision will advise you of the reason, or reasons, relied upon in making the decision.

SIX

1

I was sitting next to a young girl who didn't know her scheme very well.

"Where does 2900 Roteford go?" she asked me.

"Try throwing it to 33," I told her.

The supervisor was talking to her.

"You say you're from Kansas City? Both my parents were born in Kansas City."

"Is that so?" said the girl.

Then she asked me:

"How about 8400 Meyers?"

"Give it to 18."

She was a little on the plump side but she was ready. I passed. I'd had it with the ladies for a while. The supervisor was standing real close to her. "Do you live far from work?"

"No."

"Do you like your job?"

"Oh, yes."

She turned to me.

"How about 6200 Albany?"

"Sixteen."

When I finished my tray, the supervisor spoke to me: "Chinaski, I timed you on that tray. It took you 28 minutes."

I didn't answer.

"Do you know what the standard is for that tray?"

"No, I don't know."

"How long have you been here?"

"Eleven years."

"You've been here 11 years and you don't know the standard?"

"That's correct."

"You stick mail as if you don't care about it." The girl still had a full tray in front of her. We had begun our trays together.

"And you've been talking to this lady next to you." I lit a cigarette.

"Chinaski, come here a minute."

He stood at the front of the tin cases and pointed. All the clerks were sticking very fast now. I watched them swinging their right arms frantically. Even the plump girl was jamming them home.

"See these numbers painted on the end of the case?"

"Yeh."

"Those numbers indicate the number of pieces that must be stuck in a minute. A two-foot tray must be stuck in 23 minutes. You ran five minutes over."

He pointed to the 23. "Twenty-three minutes is standard."

"That 23 doesn't mean anything," I said.

"Whadda ya mean?"

"I mean a man came along and painted that 23 on there with a can of paint."

"No, no, this is time-tested over the years and rechecked. "

What was the use? I didn't answer.

"I'm going to have to write you up, Chinaski. You will be counseled on this."

I went back and sat down. Eleven years! I didn't have a dime more in my pocket than when I had first walked in. Eleven years. Although each night had been long, the years had gone fast. Perhaps it was the night work. Or doing the same thing over and over and over again. At least with The Stone I had never known what to expect. Here there weren't any surprises.

Eleven years shot through the head. I had seen the job eat men up. They seemed to melt. There was Jimmy Potts of Dorsey Station. When I first came in, Jimmy had been a well-built guy in a white T-shirt. Now he was gone. He put his seat as close to the floor as possible and braced himself from falling over with his feet. He was too tired to get a haircut and had worn the same pair of pants for three years. He changed shirts twice a week and he walked very slow. They had murdered him. He was 55. He had seven years to go until retirement.

“I’ll never make it,” he told me.

They either melted or they got fat, huge, especially around the ass and the belly. It was the stool and the same motion and the same talk. And there I was, dizzy spells and pains in the arms, neck, chest, everywhere. I slept all day resting up for the job. On weekends I had to drink in order to forget it. I had come in weighing 185 pounds. Now I weighed 223 pounds. All you moved was your right arm.

2

I walked into the counselor’s office. It was Eddie Beaver sitting behind the desk. The clerks called him “Skinny Beaver.” He had a pointed head, pointed nose, pointed chin. He was all points. And out for them too.

“Sit down, Chinaski.”

Beaver had some papers in his hand. He read them.

“Chinaski, it took you 28 minutes to throw a 23-minute tray.”

“Oh, knock off the bullshit. I‘m tired.”

“What?”

“I said, knock off the bullshit! Let me sign the paper and go back. I don’t want to hear it all.” “I‘m here to counsel you, Chinaski!” I sighed. “O.K., go ahead. Let’s hear it.”

“We have a production schedule to meet, Chinaski.”

“Yeh.”

“And when you fall behind on production that means that somebody else is going to stick your mail for you. That means overtime.”

“You mean I am responsible for those three and one half hours overtime they call almost every night?”

“Look, you took 28 minutes on a 23-minute tray. That’s all there is to it.”

“You know better. Each tray is two feet long. Some trays have three, even four times as many letters than others. The clerks grab what they call the ‘fat’ trays. I don’t bother. Somebody has to stick with the tough mail. Yet all you guys know is that each tray is two feet long and that it must be stuck in 23 minutes. But we’re not sticking trays in those cases, we’re sticking letters.”

“No, no, this thing has been time-tested!”

“Maybe it has. I doubt it. But if you’re going to time a man, don’t judge him on *one* tray. Even Babe Ruth struck out now and then. Judge a man on 10 trays, or a night’s work. You guys just use this thing to hang anybody who gets in your craw.”

“All right, you’ve had your say, Chinaski. Now, I‘m telling YOU: you stuck a 28-minute tray. *We* go by that. NOW, if you are caught on another slow tray you will be due for **ADVANCED COUNSELING!”**

“All right, just let me ask you one question?”

“All right.”

“Suppose I get an easy tray. Once in a while I do. Sometimes I finish a tray in five minutes or in eight minutes. Let’s say I stick a tray in eight minutes. According to the time-tested standard I have saved the post office 15 minutes. Now can I take these 15 minutes and go down to the cafeteria, have a slice of pie with ice cream, watch t.v., and come back?”

“NO! YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO GRAB A TRAY IMMEDIATELY AND START STICKING MAIL!”

I signed a paper saying that I had been counseled. Then Skinny Beaver signed my travel form, wrote the time on it and sent me back to my stool to stick more mail.

3

But, there were still bits of action. One guy was caught on the same stairway that I had been trapped on. He was caught there with his head under some girl’s skirt. Then one of the girls who worked in the cafeteria complained that she hadn’t been paid, as promised, for a bit of oral copulation she had supplied to a general foreman and three mailhandlers. They fired the girl and the three mailhandlers and busted the general foreman down to supervisor.

Then, I set the post office on fire.

I had been sent to third-class papers and was smoking a cigar, working a stack of mail off of a hand truck when some guy came by and said, “HEY, YOUR MAIL IS ON FTRE!”

I looked around. There it was. A small flame was starting to stand up like a dancing snake. Evidently part of a burning cigar ash had fallen in there earlier.

“Oh shit!”

The flame grew rapidly. I took a catalogue and, holding it flat, I beat the shit out of it. Sparks flew. It was hot. As soon as I put out one section, another caught up.

I heard a voice:

“Hey! I smell fire!”

“YOU DON’T SMELL FIRE,” I yelled, “YOU SMELL SMOKE!”

“I think I’m going to get out of here!”

“God damn you, then,” I screamed, “GET OUT!”

The flames were burning my hands. I *had* to save the United States mail, third-class junkmail!

Finally, I got it under control. I took my foot and pushed the whole pile of papers onto the floor and stepped on the last bit of red ash.

The supervisor walked up to say something to me. I stood there with the burned catalogue in my hand and waited. He looked at me and walked off.

Then I resumed casing the third-class junkmail. Anything burned, I put to one side.

My cigar had gone out. I didn't light it again.

My hands began to hurt and I walked over to the water fountain, put them under water. It didn't help.

I found the supervisor and asked him for a travel slip to the nurse's office.

It was the same one who used to come to my door and ask me, "Now what's the matter, Mr. Chinaski?"

When I walked in, she said the same thing again.

"You remember me, eh?" I asked.

"Oh yes, I know you've had some real sick nights."

"Yeh," I said.

"Do you still have women up at your apartment?" she asked.

"Yeh. Do you still have men up at yours?"

"All right, Mr. Chinaski, now what's your problem?"

"I burned my hands."

"Come over here. How did you burn your hands?"

"Does it matter? They're burned." She was dabbing my hands with something. One of her breasts brushed me.

"How did it happen, Henry?"

"Cigar. I was standing next to a truck of third-class. Ash must have gotten in there. Flames came up."

The breast was up against me again.

"Hold your hands still, *please!*"

Then she laid her whole flank against me as she spread some ointment on my hands. I was sitting on a stool.

"What's the matter, Henry? You seem nervous."

"Well … you know how it is, Martha."

"My name is *not* Martha. It's Helen."

"Let's get married, Helen."

"What?"

"I mean, how soon will I be able to use my hands again?"

"You can use them right now if you feel like it."

"What?"

"I mean, on the work floor."

She wrapped on some gauze.

"It does feel better," I told her.

"You mustn't burn the mails."

"It was junk."

"All mail is important."

"All right, Helen."

She walked over to her desk and I followed her. She filled out the travel form. She looked very cute in her little white hat. I'd have to find a way to get back there.

She saw me looking at her body.

"All right, Mr. Chinaski, I think you better leave now. "

"Oh yes … Well, thanks for everything."

"It's just part of the job."

"Sure."

A week later there were NO SMOKING IN THIS AREA signs all around. The clerks were not allowed to smoke unless they used ashtrays. Somebody had been contracted to manufacture all these ashtrays. They were nice. And said PROPERTY OF THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT. The clerks stole most of them.

NO SMOKING.

I had all by myself, Henry Chinaski, revolutionized the postal system.

4

Then some men came around and ripped out every other water fountain.

"Hey, look, what the hell are they doing?" I asked. Nobody seemed interested.

I was in the third-class flat section. I walked over to another clerk.

"Look!" I said. "They are taking away our water!"

He glanced at the water fountain, then went back to sticking his third-class.

I tried other clerks. They showed the same disinterest. I couldn't understand it.

I asked to have my union representative paged to my area.

After a long delay, here he came—Parker Anderson. Parker used to sleep in an old used car and freshen up and shave and shit at gas stations that didn't lock their restrooms. Parker had tried to be a hustler but had failed. And had come to the central post office, joined the union, and went to the union meetings where he became sarge-at-arms. He was soon a union representative, and then he was elected vice president.

"What's the matter, Hank? I know you don't need *me* to handle these soups!"

"Don't butter me, babe. Now I've been paying union dues for almost 12 years and haven't asked for a damn thing."

"All right, what's wrong?"

"It's the water fountains."

"The water fountains are wrong?"

"No, god damn it, the water fountains are right. It's what they are doing to them. Look."

"Look? Where?"

"There!"

“I don’t see anything.”

“That’s the exact nature of my bitch. There used to be a water fountain there.”

“So they took it out. What the hell?”

“Look, Parker, I wouldn’t mind one. But they are yanking out every *other* water fountain in the building. If we don’t stop them here, they will soon be closing down every other crapper… and then, what next, I don’t know…”

“All right,” said Parker, “what do you want me to do?”

“I want you to get off your ass and find out why these water fountains are being removed.”

“All right, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See that you do. Twelve years worth of union dues is $312.”

The next day I had to look for Parker. He didn’t have the answer. Or the next or the next. I told Parker that I was tired of waiting. He had one more day.

The next day he came up to me in the coffee break area.

“All right, Chinaski, I found out.”

“Yes?”

“In 1912 when this building was built …”

“In 1912? That’s over a half century ago! No wonder this place looks like the Kaiser’s whorehouse!”

“All right, stop it. Now, in 1912 when this place was built, the contract called for a *certain* number of water fountains. In checking, the p.o. found that there had been *twice* as many water fountains installed as were called for in the original contract.”

“Well, O.K.,” I said, “what harm can twice as many water fountains do? The clerks will only drink so much water.”

“Right. But the water fountains happen to jut out a bit. They get in the way.”

“So?”

“All right. Supposing a clerk with a sharp lawyer was injured against a water fountain? Say he was pinned against that fountain by a handtruck loaded with heavy sacks of magazines?”

“I see it now. The fountain isn’t supposed to be there. The post office is sued for negligence.”

“Right!”

“All right. Thanks, Parker.”

“My service.”

If he had made up the story, it was damn near worth $312. I’d seen a lot worse printed in *Playboy*.

5

I found that the only way I could keep from dizzy-spelling into my case was to get up and take a walk now and then.

Fazzio, a supervisor who had the station at the time, saw me walking up to one of the rare water fountains.

“Look, Chinaski, everytime I see you, you’re walking!”

“That’s nothing,” I said, “everytime I see you, you’re walking.”

“But that’s part of my job. Walking is part of my job. I have to do it.”

“Look,” I said, “it’s part of my job too. I have to do it. If I stay on that stool much longer I am going to leap up on top of those tin cases and start running around whistling *Dixie* from my asshole and *Mammy’s Little Children Love Shortnin’ Bread* through the frontal orifice.”

“All right, Chinaski, forget it.”

6

One night I was coming around the corner after sneaking down to the cafeteria for a pack of smokes. And there was a face I knew.

It was Tom Moto! The guy I had subbed with under The Stone!

“Moto, you motherfuck!” I said.

“Hank!” he said. We shook hands.

“Hey, I was thinking of you! Jonstone is retiring this month. Some of us are holding a farewell party for him. You know, he always liked to fish. We’re going to take him out in a rowboat. Maybe you’d like to come along and throw him overboard, drown him. We’ve got a nice deep lake.”

“No, shit, I just don’t even want to look at him.”

“But you’re *invited.*”

Moto was grinning from asshole to eyebrow. Then I looked at his shirt: a supervisor’s badge. “Oh no, Tom.”

“Hank, I’ve got four kids. They need me for bread and butter.”

“All right, Tom,” I said. Then I walked off.

7

I don’t know how it happens to people. I had child support, need for something to drink, rent, shoes, socks, all that stuff. Like everyone else I needed an old car, something to eat, all the little intangibles.

Like women.

Or a day at the track.

With everything on the line and no way out, you don’t even think about it.

I parked across the street from the Federal Building and stood waiting for the signal to change. I walked across. Pushed through the swinging doors. It was as if I were a piece of iron drawn to the magnet. There was nothing I could do.

It was on the second floor. I opened the door and they were in there. The clerks of the Federal Building. I noticed one girl, poor thing, only one arm. She’d be there forever. It was like being an old wino like me. Well, as the boys said, you had to work somewhere. So they accepted what there was. This was the wisdom of the slave.

A young black girl walked up. She was well-dressed and pleased with her surroundings. I was happy for her. I would have gone mad with the same job.

“Yes?” she asked.

“I’m a postal clerk,” I said, “I want to resign.” She reached under the counter and came up with a stack of papers. “All these?”

She smiled, “Sure you can do it?”

“Don’t worry,” I said, “I can do it.”

8

You had to fill out more papers to get out than to get in. The first page they gave you was a personalized mimeo affair from the postmaster of the city. It began: “I am sorry you are terminating your position with the post office and …” etc., etc., etc., etc.

How could he be sorry? He didn’t even know me. There was a list of questions.

“Did you find our supervisors understanding? Were you able to relate to them?” Yes, I answered.

“Did you find the supervisors in any manner prejudiced toward race, religion, background or any related factor?”

No, I answered.

Then there was one—”Would you advise your friends to seek employment in the post office?” Of course, I answered.

“If you have any grievances or complaints about the post office please list them in detail on the reverse side of this page.”

No grievances, I answered.

Then my black girl was back.

“Finished already?”

“Finished.”

“I’ve never seen anybody fill out their papers that fast.”

“‘Quickly,’” I said.

“‘Quickly’?” she asked. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, what do we do next?”

“Please step in.”

I followed her ass between desks to a place almost to the back.

“Sit down,” the man said.

He took some time reading through the papers. Then he looked at me.

"May I ask why you are resigning? Is it because of disciplinary procedures against you?"

"No."

"Then what is the reason for your resignation?"

"To pursue a career."

"To pursue a career?"

He looked at me. I was less than eight months from my 50th birthday. I knew what he was thinking.

"May I ask you what your 'career' will be?"

"Well, sir, I'll tell you. The trapping season in the bayou only lasts from December through February. I've already lost a month."

"A month? But you've been here 11 years."

"All right, then, I've wasted 11 years. I can pick up 10 to 20 grand for three months trapping at Bayou La Fourche."

"What do you do?"

"Trap! Muskrats, nutria, mink, otter … coon. All I need is a pirogue. I give 20 percent of my take for use of the land. I get paid a buck and a quarter for muskrat skins, three bucks for mink, four bucks for 'bo mink,' a buck and a half for nutria and twenty-five bucks for otter. I sell the muskrat carcass, which is about a foot long, for five cents to a cat food factory. I get twenty-five cents for the skinned body of the nutria. I raise pigs, chickens and ducks. I catch catfish. There's nothing to it. I —"

"Never mind, Mr. Chinaski, that will be sufficient."

He put some papers in his typewriter and typed away.

Then I looked up and there was Parker Anderson my union man, good old gas-station shaving and shitting Parker, giving me his politician's grin.

"You resigning, Hank? I *know* you been threatenin' to for eleven years …"

"Yeah, I'm going to Southern Louisiana and catch myself a batch of goodies."

"They got a racetrack down there?"

“You kidding? The Fair Grounds is one of the oldest tracks in the country!”

Parker had a young white boy with him—one of the neurotic tribe of the lost—and the kid’s eyes were filmed with wet layers of tears. One big tear in each eye. They did not drop out. It was fascinating. I had seen women sit and look at me with those same eyes before they got mad and started screaming about what a son of a bitch I was. Evidently the boy had fallen into one of the many traps, and he had gone running for Parker. Parker would save his job.

The man gave me one more paper to sign and then I got out of there.

Parker said, “Luck, old man,” as I walked by. “Thanks, baby,” I answered.

I didn’t feel any different. But I knew that soon, like a man lifted quickly out of the deep sea, I would be afflicted—with a particular type of bends. I was like Joyce’s damned parakeets. After living in the cage I had taken the opening and flown out—like a shot into the heavens. Heavens?

9

I went into the bends. I got drunker and stayed drunker than a shit skunk in Purgatory. I even had the butcher knife against my throat one night in the kitchen and then I thought, easy, old boy, your little girl might want you to take her to the zoo. Ice cream bars, chimpanzees, tigers, green and red birds, and the sun coming down on top of her head, the sun coining down and crawling into the hairs of your arms, easy, old boy.

When I came to I was in the front room of my apartment, spitting into the rug, putting cigarettes out against my wrists, laughing. Mad as a March Hare. I looked up and there sat this pre-med student. A human heart sat in a homey fat jar between us on the coffeetable. All around the human heart—which was labeled after its former owner “Francis”—were half empty fifths of whiskey and scotch, clutters of beerbottles, ashtrays, garbage. I’d pick up a bottle and swallow a hellish mixture of beer and ashes. I hadn’t eaten for two weeks. An endless stream of people had come and gone. There had been seven or eight wild parties where I had kept demanding—”More to drink! More to drink! More to drink!” I was flying up to heaven; they were just talking—and fingering each other.

“Yeh,” I said to the pre-med student, “what do you want with me?”

“I am going to be your own personal physician.”

“All right, doctor, the first thing I want you to do is to take that god damned human heart out of here!”

“Uh uh.”

“What?”

“The heart stays here.”

“Look, man, I don’t know your name—”

“Wilbert.”

"Well, Wilbert, I don't know who you are or how you got here but you take 'Francis' with you!"

"No, it stays with you."

Then he got his little playbag and the rubber wraparound for the arm and he squeezed the ball and the rubber inflated.

"You've got the blood pressure of a 19-year-old," he told me.

"Fuck that. Look, isn't it against the law to leave human hearts laying around?"

"I'll be back to get it. Now breathe *in!"*

"I thought the post office was driving me crazy. Now you come along."

"Quiet! Breathe *in!"*

"I need a good young piece of ass, doctor. That's what's wrong with me."

"Your backbone is out of place in 14 areas, Chinaski. That breeds tension, imbecility, and, often, madness."

"Balls!" I said …

I don't remember the gentleman leaving. I awakened on my couch at 1:10 p.m., death in the afternoon, and it was hot, the sun ripping through my torn shades to rest on the jar in the center of the coffeetable. "Francis" had stayed with me all night, stewing in alcoholic brine, swimming in the mucous extension of the dead diastole. Sitting there in the jar.

It looked like fried chicken. I mean, before you fried it. Exactly.

I picked it up and put it in my closet and covered it with a torn shirt. Then I went to the bathroom and vomited. I finished, stuck my face against the mirror. There were long black hairs sticking out all over my face. Suddenly I had to sit down and shit. It was a good hot one.

The doorbell rang. I finished wiping my ass, got into some old clothes and went to the door. "Hello?"

There was a young guy out there with long blonde hair hanging down around his face and a black girl who just kept smiling as if she were crazy. "Hank?"

"Yeh. Who you two guys?"

"She is a woman. Don't you remember us? From the party? We brought a flower."

"Oh balls, come on in."

They brought in the flower, some kind of red-orange thing on a green stem. It made a lot more sense than many things, except that it had been murdered. I found a bowl, put the flower in, brought out a jug of wine and put it on the coffeetable.

"You don't remember her?" the kid asked. "You said you wanted to fuck her."

She laughed.

"Very nice, but not now."

"Chinaski, how are you going to make it without the post office?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll fuck you. Or let you fuck me. Hell, I don't know."

"You can sleep on our floor anytime."

"Can I watch while you fuck?"

"Sure."

We drank. I had forgotten their names. I showed them the heart. I asked them to take the horrible thing with them. I didn't dare throw it out in case the pre-med student needed it back for an exam or at the expiration of the med-library loan or whatever.

So we went down and saw a nude floor show, drinking and hollering and laughing. I don't know who had the money but I think he had most of it, which was nice for a change, and I kept laughing and squeezing the girl's ass and her thighs and kissing her, but nobody cared. As long as the money lasted, you lasted.

They drove rae back and he left with her. I got into the door, said goodbye, turned on the radio, found a half-pint of scotch, drank that, laughing, feeling good, finally relaxed, free, burning my fingers with short cigar butts, then made it to the bed, made it to the edge, tripped, fell down, fell down across the mattress, slept, slept, slept …

• • •

In the morning it was morning and I was still alive.
Maybe I’ll write a novel, I thought.
And then I did.

United States Post Office
Los Angeles, California
Office of Postmaster January 1, 1970
Memo 742

CODE OF ETHICS

The attention of all employees is directed to the Code of Ethics for postal employees as set forth in Part 742 of the Postal Manual, and Conduct of Employees as outlined in Part 744 of the Postal Manual.

Postal employees have, over the years, established a fine tradition of faithful service to the Nation, unsurpassed by other groups. Each employee should take great pride in this tradition of dedicated service. Each of us must strive to make his contribution worthwhile in the continued movement of the Postal Service toward future progress in the public interest.

All postal personnel must act with unwavering integrity and complete devotion to the public interest. Postal personnel are expected to maintain the highest moral principles, and to uphold the laws of the United States and the regulations and policies of the Post Office Department. Not only is ethical conduct required, but officials and employees must be alert to avoid actions which would appear to prevent fulfillment of postal obligations. Assigned duties must be discharged conscientiously and effectively. The Postal Service has the unique privilege of having daily contact with the majority of the citizens of the Nation, and is, in many instances, their most direct contact with the Federal Government. Thus, there is an especial opportunity and responsibility for each postal employee to act with honor and integrity worthy of the public trust; thereby reflecting credit and distinction on the Postal Service and on the entire Federal Government.

All employees are requested to review Part 742, Postal Manual, Basic Standards of Ethical Conduct, Personal Behavior of Employees, Restrictions on Political Activity, etc.

Officer in Charge

About the Author

CHARLES BUKOWSKI is one of America's best-known contemporary writers of poetry and prose, and, many would claim, its most influential and imitated poet. He was born in Andernach, Germany, to an American soldier father and a German mother in 1920, and brought to the United States at the age of three. He was raised in Los Angeles and lived there for fifty years. He published his first story in 1944 when he was twenty-four and began writing poetry at the age of thirty-five. He died in San Pedro, California, on March 9, 1994, at the age of-seventy-three, shortly after completing his last novel, *Pulp* (1994).

During his lifetime he published more than forty-five books of poetry and prose, including the novels *Post Office* (1971), *Factotum* (1975), *Women* (1978), *Ham on Rye* (1982), and *Hollywood* (1989). Among his most recent books are the posthumous editions of *What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire* (1999), *Open All Night: New Poems* (2000), *Beerspit Night and Cursing: The Correspondence of Charles Bukowski and Sheri Martinelli 1960-1967* (2001), and *The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps: New Poems* (2001).

All of his books have now been published in translation in over a dozen languages and his worldwide popularity remains undiminished. In the years to come, Ecco will publish additional volumes of previously uncollected poetry and letters.

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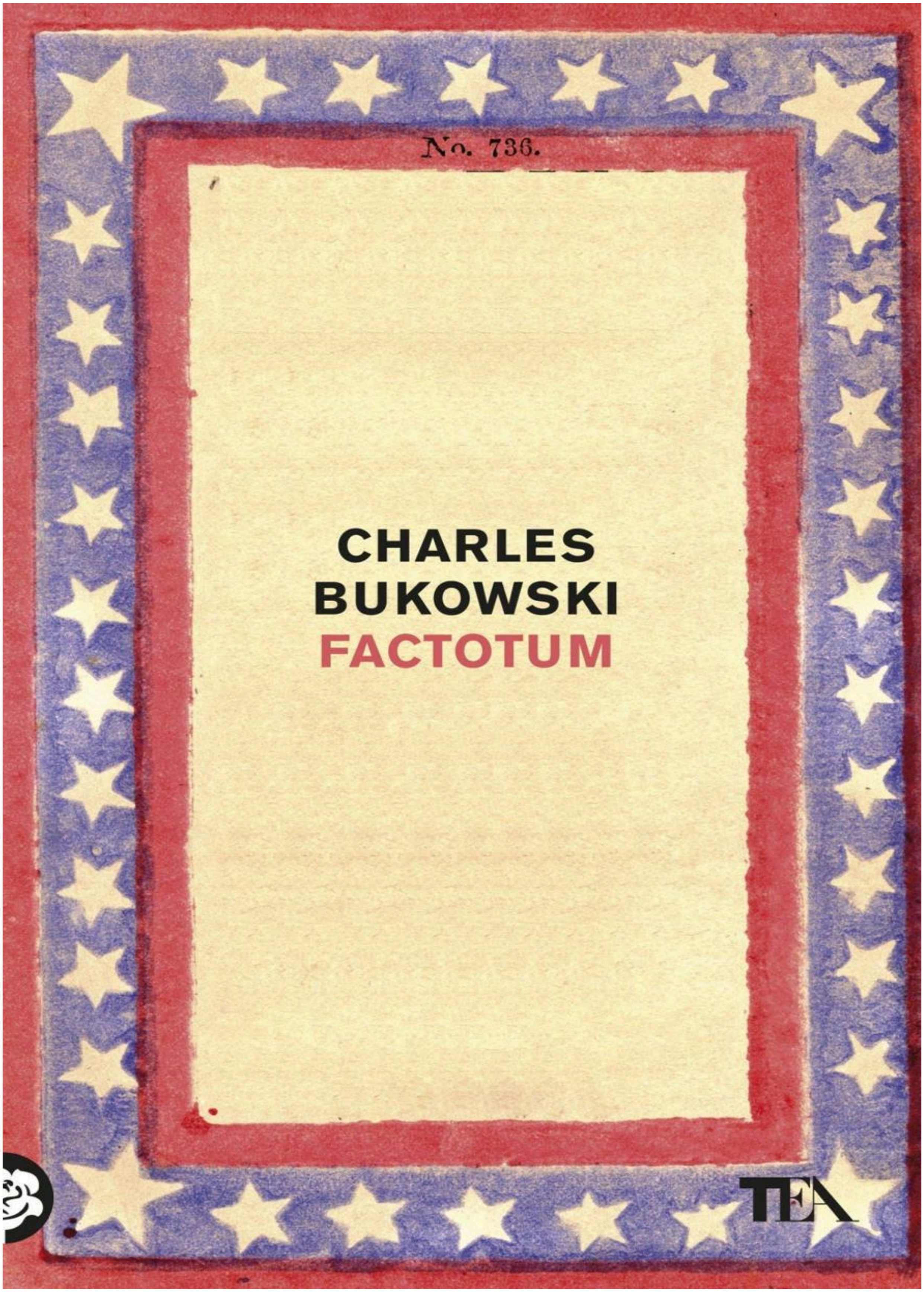

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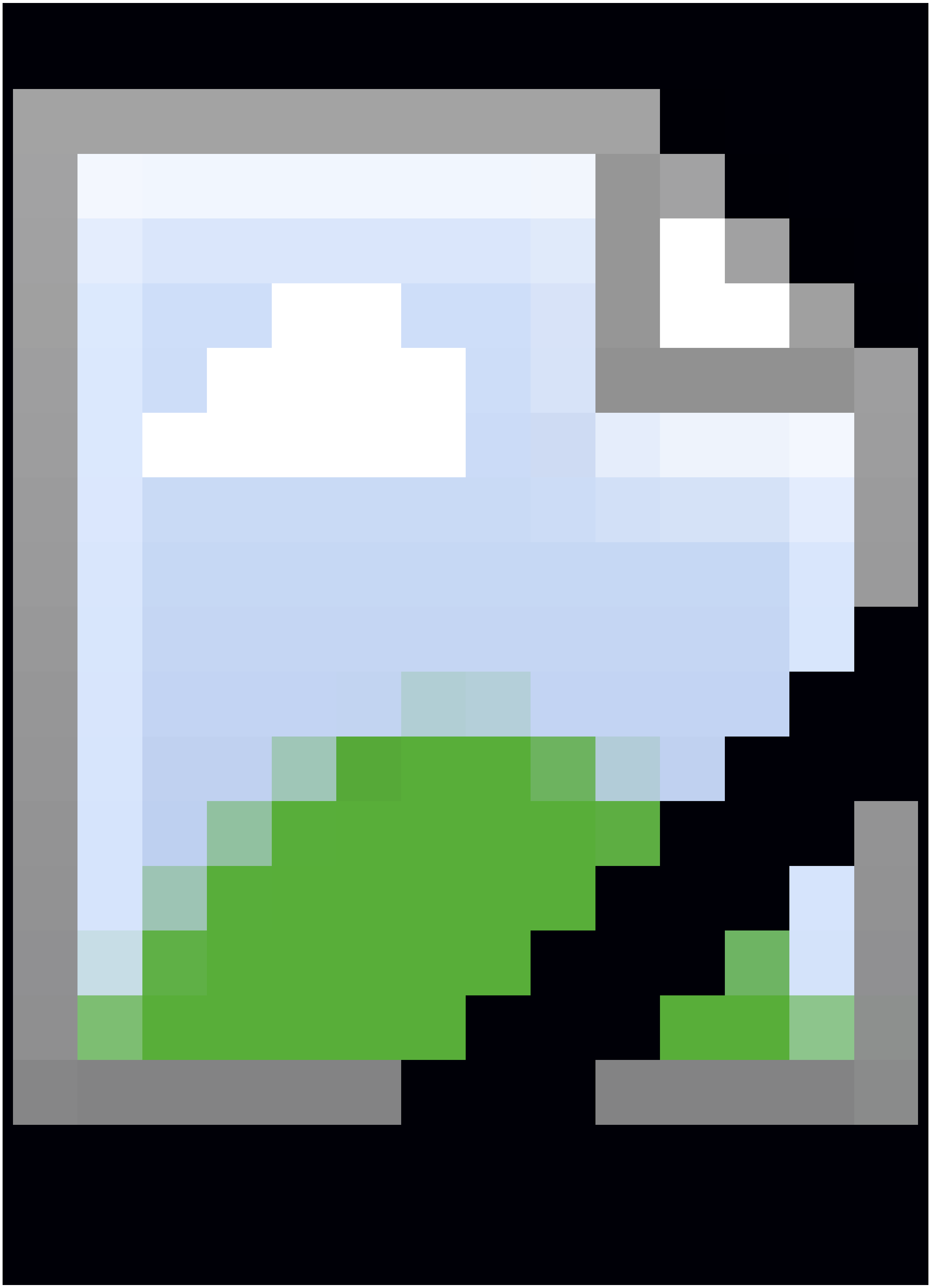

Charles Bukowski

FACTOTUM

HarperCollins e-books

For John & Barbara Martin

The novelist does not long to see the lion eat grass. He realizes that one and the same God created the wolf and the lamb, then smiled, “seeing that his work was good.”

—Andre Gide

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52
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53
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54
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55
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56
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57
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58
I got to my room and took my old pants…
59
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60
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61
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62
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63
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64
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65

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66
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67
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68
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69
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70
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71
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72
There were forty or fifty of us in the Training…
73
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74
Business didn’t seem to be too good. Outgoing orders were…
75
Mary Lou was one of the girls in the front…
76
Bud came back pushing three one gallon cans of paint…
77
Paul was one of the clerks. He was fat, about…
78
Mr. Manders walked back to where I was working and…
79
The store was going broke. Each day the orders were…
80
The next thing that happened was that they hired a…
81
The next job didn’t last long either. It was little…
82

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83
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84
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85
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86
The Farm Labor Market was at Fifth and San Pedro…
87
Workmen For Industry was located right on the edge of…

About the Author
Other Books by Charles Bukowski
Copyright
About the Publisher

1

I arrived in New Orleans in the rain at 5 o'clock in the morning. I sat around in the bus station for a while but the people depressed me so I took my suitcase and went out in the rain and began walking. I didn't know where the rooming houses were, where the poor section was.

I had a cardboard suitcase that was falling apart. It had once been black but the black coating had peeled off and yellow cardboard was exposed. I had tried to solve that by putting black shoepolish over the exposed cardboard. As I walked along in the rain the shoepolish on the suitcase ran and unwittingly I rubbed black streaks on both legs of my pants as I switched the suitcase from hand to hand.

Well, it was a new town. Maybe I'd get lucky.

The rain stopped and the sun came out. I was in the black district. I walked along slowly.

"*Hey, poor white trash!*"

I put my suitcase down. A high yellow was sitting on the porch steps swinging her legs. She did look good.

"*Hello, poor white trash!*"

I didn't say anything. I just stood there looking at her.

"*How'd you like a piece of ass, poor white trash?*"

She laughed at me. She had her legs crossed high and she kicked her feet; she had nice legs, high heels, and she kicked her legs and laughed. I picked up my suitcase and began to approach her up the walk. As I did I noticed a side curtain on a window to my left move just a bit. I saw a black man's face. He looked like Jersey Joe Wolcott. I backed down the pathway to the sidewalk. Her laughter followed me down the street.

2

I was in a room on the second floor across from a bar. The bar was called The Gangplank Cafe. From my room I could see through the open bar doors and into the bar. There were some rough faces in that bar, some interesting faces. I stayed in my room at night and drank wine and looked at the faces in the bar while my money ran out. In the daytime I took long slow walks. I sat for hours staring at pigeons. I only ate one meal a day so my money would last longer. I found a dirty cafe with a dirty proprietor, but you got a big breakfast—hotcakes, grits, sausage—for very little.

3

I went out on the street, as usual, one day and strolled along. I felt happy and relaxed. The sun was just right. Mellow. There was peace in the air. As I approached the center of the block there was a man standing outside the doorway of a shop. I walked past.

"Hey, BUDDY!"

I stopped and turned.

"You want a job?"

I walked back to where he stood. Over his shoulder I could see a large dark room. There was a long table with men and women standing on both sides of it. They had hammers with which they pounded objects in front of them. In the gloom the objects appeared to be clams. They smelled like clams. I turned and continued walking down the street.

I remembered how my father used to come home each night and talk about his job to my mother. The job talk began when he entered the door, continued over the dinner table, and ended in the bedroom where my father would scream "*Lights Out!*" at 8 p.m., so he could get his rest and his full strength for the job the next day. There was no other subject except the job.

Down by the corner I was stopped by another man.

"Listen, my friend…" he began.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Listen, I'm a veteran of World War I. I put my life on the line for this country but nobody will hire me, nobody will give me a job. They don't appreciate what I did. I'm hungry, give me some help…"

"I'm not working."

"You're not working?"

"That's right."

I walked away. I crossed the street to the other side.

"*You're lying!*" he screamed. "*You're working. You've got a job!*"

A few days later I was looking for one.

4

He was a man behind the desk with a hearing aid and the wire ran down along the side of his face and into his shirt where he hid the battery. The office was dark and comfortable. He was dressed in a worn brown suit with a wrinkled white shirt and a necktie frayed at the edges. His name was Heathercliff.

I had seen the ad in the local paper and the place was near my room.

> Need ambitious young man with an eye to the future. Exper. not necessary. Begin in delivery room and work up.

I waited outside with five or six young men, all of them trying to look ambitious. We had filled out our employment applications and now we waited. I was the last to be called.

"Mr. Chinaski, what made you leave the railroad yards?"

"Well, I don't see any future in the railroads."

"They have good unions, medical care, retirement."

"At my age, retirement might almost be considered superfluous."

"Why did you come to New Orleans?"

"I had too many friends in Los Angeles, friends I felt were hindering my career. I wanted to go where I could concentrate unmolested."

"How do we know that you'll remain with *us* any length of time?"

"I might not."

"Why?"

"Your ad stated that there was a future for an ambitious man. If there isn't any future here then I must leave."

"Why haven't you shaved your face? Did you lose a bet?"

"Not yet."

"Not yet?"

"No; I bet my landlord that I could land a job in one day even with this beard."

"All right, we'll let you know."

"I don't have a phone."

"That's all right, Mr. Chinaski."

I left and went back to my room. I went down the dirty hall and took a hot bath. Then I put my clothes back on and went out and got a bottle of wine. I came back to the room and sat by the window drinking and watching the people in the bar, watching the people walk by. I drank slowly and began to think again of getting a gun and doing it quickly—without all the thought and talk. A matter of guts. I wondered about my guts. I finished the bottle and went to bed and slept. About 4 p.m. I was awakened by a knock on the door. It was a Western Union boy. I opened the telegram: MR. H. CHINASKI. REPORT TO WORK 8 AM TOMORROW. R.M. HEATHERCLIFF CO.

5

It was a magazine publishers distributing house and we stood at the packing table checking the orders to see that the quantities coincided with the invoices. Then we signed the invoice and either packed the order for out of town shipment or set the magazines aside for local truck delivery. The work was easy and dull but the clerks were in a constant state of turmoil. They were worried about their jobs. There was a mixture of young men and women and there didn't seem to be a foreman. After several hours an argument began between two of the women. It was something about the magazines. We were packing comic books and something had gone wrong across the table. The two women became violent as the argument went on.

"Look," I said, "these books aren't worth reading let alone arguing about."

"All right," one of the women said, "we know you think you're too good for this job."

"Too good?"

"Yes, your attitude. You think we didn't notice it?"

That's when I first learned that it wasn't enough to just *do* your job, you had to have an interest in it, even a passion for it.

I worked there three or four days, then on Friday we were paid right up to the hour. We were given yellow envelopes with green bills and the exact change. Real money, no checks.

Toward quitting time the truck driver came back a little early. He sat on a pile of magazines and smoked a cigarette.

"Yeah, Harry," he said to one of the clerks, "I got a raise today. I got a two dollar raise."

At quitting time I stopped for a bottle of wine, went up to my room, had a drink then went downstairs and phoned my company. The phone rang a long time. Finally Mr. Heathercliff answered. He was still there.

"Mr. Heathercliff?"

"Yes?"

"This is Chinaski."

"Yes, Mr. Chinaski?"

"I want a two dollar raise."

"What?"

"That's right. The truck driver got a raise."

"But he's been with us two years."

"I need a raise."

"We're giving you seventeen dollars a week now and you're asking for nineteen?"

"That's right. Do I get it or not?"

"We just can't do it."

"Then I quit." I hung up.

6

Monday I was hungover. I shaved off my beard and followed up an ad. I sat across from the editor, a man in shirt sleeves with deep hollows under his eyes. He looked as if he hadn't slept for a week. It was cool and dark in there. It was the composing room of one of the town's two newspapers, the small one. Men sat at desks under reading lamps working at copy.

"Twelve dollars a week," he said.

"All right," I said, "I'll take it."

I worked with a little fat man with an unhealthy looking paunch. He had an old-fashioned pocket watch on a gold chain and he wore a vest, a green sunshade, had thick lips and a meaty dark look to his face. The lines in his face had no interest or character; his face looked as if it had been folded several times and then smoothed out, like a piece of cardboard. He wore square shoes and chewed tobacco, squirting the juice into a spitoon at his feet.

"Mr. Belger," he said of the man who needed the sleep, "has worked hard to put this paper on its feet. He's a good man. We were going bankrupt until he came along."

He looked at me. "They usually give this job to a college boy."

He's a frog, I thought, that's what he is.

"I mean," he said, "this job usually goes to a student. He can study his books while he waits for a call. Are you a student?"

"No."

"This job usually goes to a student."

I walked back to my work room and sat down. The room was filled with rows and rows of metal drawers and in the drawers were zinc engravings that had been used for ads. Many of these engravings were used again and again. There was also lots of type—customer names and logos. The fat man would scream "*Chinaski!*" and I'd go see which ad or what type he wanted. Often I was sent to the competing newspaper to borrow some of their type. They borrowed ours. It was a nice walk and I found a place in a back alley where I could get a glass of beer for a nickel. There weren't many calls from the fat man and the nickel beer place became my hangout. The fat man began to miss me. At first he simply gave me unkind looks. Then one day he asked: "Where you been?"

"Out getting a beer."

"This is a job for a student."

"I'm not a student."

"I gotta let you go. I need somebody who is right here all the time available."

The fat man took me over to Belger who looked as tired as ever. "This is a job for a student, Mr. Belger. I'm afraid this man doesn't fit in. We need a student."

"All right," said Belger. The fat man padded off.

"What do we owe you?" asked Belger.

"Five days."

"O.K., take this down to payroll."

"Listen, Belger, that old fuck is disgusting."

Belger sighed. "Jesus Christ, don't I know it?"

I went down to payroll.

7

We were still in Louisiana. The long train ride through Texas lay ahead. They gave us cans of food but no openers. I stored my cans on the floor and stretched out on the wooden seat. The other men were gathered in the front of the coach, sitting together, talking and laughing. I closed my eyes.

After about ten minutes I felt dust rising up through the cracks in the plank seat. It was very old dust, coffin dust, it stank of death, of something that had been dead for a long time. It filtered into my nostrils, settled into my eyebrows, tried to enter my mouth. Then I heard heavy breathing sounds. Through the cracks I could see a man crouched behind the seat, blowing the dust into my face. I sat up. The man scrambled out from behind the seat and ran to the front of the car. I wiped my face and stared at him. It was hard to believe.

“If he comes up here I want you fellows to help me,” I heard him say. “You gotta promise to help me…”

The gang of them looked back at me. I stretched out on the seat again. I could hear them talking: “What’s wrong with him?” “Who does he think he is?” “He don’t speak to nobody.” “He just stays back there by himself.”

“When we get him out there on those tracks we’ll take care of him. The bastard.”

“You think you can take him, Paul? He looks crazy to me.”

“If I can’t take him, somebody can. He’ll eat shit before we’re done.”

Some time later I walked to the front of the car for a drink of water. As I walked by they stopped talking. They watched me in silence as I drank water from the cup. Then as I turned and walked back to my seat they started talking again.

The train made many stops, night and day. At every stop where there was a bit of green and a small town nearby, one or two of the men would jump off.

"Hey, what the hell happened to Collins and Martinez?"

The foreman would take his clipboard and cross them off the list. He walked back to me. "Who are you?"

"Chinaski."

"You staying with us?"

"I need the job."

"O.K." He walked away.

At El Paso the foreman came through and told us we were switching trains. We were given tickets good for one night at a nearby hotel and a meal ticket to use at a local cafe; also directions on how, when and where to board the next train through in the a.m.

I waited outside the cafe as the men ate and as they came out picking their teeth and talking, I walked in.

"We'll get his ass good, that son of a bitch!"

"Man, I hate that ugly bastard."

I went in and ordered a hamburger steak with onions and beans. There wasn't any butter for the bread but the coffee was good. When I came out they were gone. A bum was walking up the sidewalk toward me. I gave him my hotel ticket.

I slept in the park that night. It seemed safer. I was tired and that hard park bench didn't bother me at all. I slept.

Some time later I was awakened by what sounded like a roar. I never knew that alligators roared. Or more exactly it was many things: a roar, an agitated inhale, and a hiss. I also heard the snapping of jaws. A drunken sailor was in the center of the pond and he had one of the alligators by the tail. The creature tried to twist and reach the sailor but found it difficult. The jaws were horrifying but very slow and uncoordinated. Another sailor and a young girl stood watching and laughing.

Then the sailor kissed the girl and they walked off together leaving the other fighting the alligator…

I was next awakened by the sun. My shirt was hot. It was almost burning. The sailor was gone. So was the alligator. On a bench to the east sat a girl and two young men. They had evidently slept in the park that night too. One of the young men stood up.

"Mickey," said the young girl, "you've got a hard-on!"

They laughed.

"How much money we got?"

They looked through their pockets. They had a nickel.

"Well, what are we going to do?"

"I don't know. Let's start walking."

I watched them walk off, out of the park, into the city.

8

When the train stopped in Los Angeles we had a two or three day stopover. They issued hotel and meal tickets again. I gave my hotel tickets to the first bum I met. As I was walking along looking for the cafe where I would use my meal tickets I found myself behind two of the men who had shared the ride from New Orleans. I walked faster until I was alongside of them.

“How are you doing fellows?” I asked.

“Oh, everything’s all right, everything’s fine.”

“Are you sure? Nothing bothering you?”

“No, everything’s all right.”

I went ahead and found the cafe. They served beer there so I exchanged my tickets for beer. The whole track gang was there. When I’d used up my tickets I had just enough change to take a streetcar back to the home of my parents.

9

My mother screamed when she opened the door. “*Son! Is that you, son?*”

“I need some sleep.”

“Your bedroom is always waiting.”

I went to the bedroom, undressed and climbed into bed. I was awakened about 6 p.m. by my mother. “Your father is home.”

I got up and began to dress. Dinner was on the table when I walked in.

My father was a big man, taller than I was with brown eyes; mine were green. His nose was too large and you couldn’t help noticing his ears. His ears wanted to leap away from his head.

“Listen,” he said, “if you stay here I am going to charge you room and board plus laundry. When you get a job, what you owe us will be subtracted from your salary until you are paid up.”

We ate in silence.

10

My mother had found a job. She was to start the next day. This left the house to me. After breakfast and after my parents had left for their jobs I took off my clothes and went back to bed. I masturbated and then made a time study in an old school notebook of the airplanes passing overhead. I decorated the time study with some pleasantly obscene drawings. I knew that my father would charge me atrocious prices for room, board and laundry and that he would also be careful to list me as a dependent on his income tax return, but the desire to find a job did not seem to be with me.

As I relaxed in bed I had this strange feeling in my head. It was as if my skull was made of cotton, or was a small balloon filled with air. I could feel *space* in my skull. I couldn’t comprehend it. Soon I stopped wondering about it. I was comfortable, it wasn’t agonizing. I listened to symphony music, smoking my father’s cigarettes.

I got up and walked into the front room. In the house across the street was a young wife. She had on a short tight brown dress. She sat on the steps of her house which was directly across the street. I could look well up her dress. I watched from behind the drapes of the front window, looking up her dress. I became excited. Finally I masturbated again. I bathed and dressed and sat about smoking more cigarettes. About 5 p.m. I left the house and went for a long walk, walking for almost an hour.

When I returned, both of my parents were home. Dinner was about ready. I went to my bedroom and waited to be called. I was called. I went in.

“Well,” said my father, “did you find a job?”

"No."

"Listen, any man who wants work can find work."

"Maybe so."

"I can hardly believe you're my son. You don't have any ambition, you don't have any get-up-and-go. How the hell are you going to make it in this world?"

He put a number of peas into his mouth and spoke again: "What's this cigarette smoke in here? *Pooh!* I had to open all the windows! The air was *blue*!"

11

The next day I went back to bed for a while after they were gone. Then I got up and went to the front room and looked out between the drapes. The young housewife was again sitting on her steps across the street. She had on a different, sexier dress. I looked at her a long time. Then I masturbated slowly and at leisure.

I bathed and dressed. I found some empty bottles in the kitchen and cashed them in at the grocery. I found a bar on the Avenue and went in and ordered a draft beer. There were a great many drunks in there playing the juke box, talking loudly and laughing. Now and then a new beer arrived in front of me. Somebody was buying. I drank. I began talking to people.

Then I looked outside. It was evening, almost dark. The beers kept arriving. The fat woman who owned the bar and her boyfriend were friendly.

I went outside once to fight somebody. It wasn't a good fight. We were both too drunk and there were large potholes in the asphalt surface of the parking lot that made our footing difficult. We quit…

I awakened much later in an upholstered red booth at the back of the bar. I got up and looked around. Everybody was gone. The clock said 3:15. I tried the door, it was locked. I went behind the bar and got myself a bottle of beer, opened it, came back and sat down. Then I went and got myself a cigar and a bag of chips. I finished my beer, got up and found a bottle of vodka, one of scotch and sat down again. I mixed them with water; I smoked cigars, and ate beef jerky, chips, and hard-boiled eggs.

I drank until 5 a.m. I cleaned the bar then, put everything away, went to the door, let myself out. As I did I saw a police car approach. They drove along slowly behind me as I walked.

After a block they pulled up alongside. An officer stuck his head out. “Hey, buddy!”

Their lights were in my face.

“What are you doing?”

“Going home.”

“You live around here?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“2122 Longwood Avenue.”

“What were you doing coming out of that bar?”

“I’m the janitor.”

“Who owns that bar?”

“A lady named Jewel.”

“Get in.”

I did.

“Show us where you live.”

They drove me home.

“Now, get out and ring the bell.”

I walked up the drive. I went up on the porch, rang the bell. There was no answer.

I rang again, several times. Finally the door opened. My mother and father stood there in their pajamas and robes.

“*You’re drunk!*” my father screamed.

“Yes.”

“Where do you get the money to drink? You don’t have any money!”

“I’ll get a job.”

“*You’re drunk! You’re drunk! My Son is a Drunk! My Son is a God Damned No-Good Drunk!*”

The hair on my father’s head was standing up in crazy tufts. His eyebrows were wild, his face puffed and flushed with sleep.

“You act as if I had murdered somebody.”

“*It’s just as bad!*”

"…ooh, shit…"

Suddenly I vomited on their Persian *Tree of Life* rug. My mother screamed. My father lunged toward me.

"Do you know what we do to a dog when he shits on the rug?"

"Yes."

He grabbed the back of my neck. He pressed down, forcing me to bend at the waist. He was trying to force me to my knees.

"I'll show you."

"Don't…"

My face was almost into it.

"I'll show you what we do to dogs!"

I came up from the floor with the punch. It was a perfect shot. He staggered back all the way across the room and sat down on the couch. I followed him over.

"Get up."

He sat there. I heard my mother. "*You Hit Your Father! You Hit Your Father! You Hit Your Father!*"

She screamed and ripped open one side of my face with her fingernails.

"Get up," I told my father.

"*You Hit Your Father!*"

She scratched my face again. I turned to look at her. She got the other side of my face. Blood was running down my neck, was soaking my shirt, pants, shoes, the rug. She lowered her hands and stared at me.

"Have you finished?"

She didn't answer. I walked back to the bedroom thinking, I better find myself a job.

12

I stayed in my room until after they left the next morning. Then I took the newspaper and turned to the Help Wanted section. My face hurt; I was still sick. I circled some ads, shaved as best I could, took a few aspirin, dressed, and walked over to the Boulevard. I put my thumb out. The cars went by. Then a car stopped. I got in.

"Hank!"

It was an old friend, Timmy Hunter. We'd gone to Los Angeles City College together.

"What are you doing, Hank?"

"Looking for a job."

"I'm going to Southern Cal now. What happened to your face?"

"The fingernails of a woman."

"Yeh?"

"Yeh. Timmy, I need a drink."

Timmy parked at the next bar. We went in and he ordered two bottles of beer.

"What kind of job you looking for?"

"Stockboy, shipping clerk, janitor."

"Listen, I got some money at home. I know a good bar in Inglewood. We can go there."

He was living with his mother. We went in and the old lady looked up from her newspaper: "Hank, don't you go getting Timmy drunk."

"How are you doing, Mrs. Hunter?"

"The last time you and Timmy went out you both ended up in jail."

Timmy put his books in the bedroom and came out. “Let’s go,” he said.

It was Hawaiian decor, crowded. A man was on the phone: “You got to have somebody come get the truck. I’m too drunk to drive. Yes, I know I’ve lost the goddamned job, just come and get the truck!”

Timmy bought, we both drank. His conversation was O.K. A young blonde was glancing over and showing me leg. Timmy talked on and on. He talked about City College: how we kept wine bottles in our locker; about Popoff and his wooden guns; about Popoff and his real guns; about how we shot the bottom out of a boat in Westlake Park and sank; about the time the students went on strike in the college gym…

The drinks kept coming. The young blonde girl left with someone else. The juke box played. Timmy talked on. It was getting dark. We were 86’d, walked down the street looking for another bar. It was 10 p.m. We could hardly stand up. The street was full of cars.

“Look Timmy, let’s rest.”

I saw it. A mortuary, like a colonial mansion, with floodlights, and a wide white staircase leading up to the porch.

Timmy and I went about halfway up the staircase. Then I carefully stretched him out on a step. I straightened his legs and put his arms neatly down by his sides. Then I stretched out in a similar position on the step below Timmy.

13

I woke up in a room. I was alone. It was just getting light. It was cold. I was in my shirtsleeves. I tried to think. I got up from the hard bunk, went to the window. It was barred. There was the Pacific Ocean. (Somehow I was in Malibu.) The jailor came along about an hour later, banging metal dishes and trays. He passed my breakfast through to me. I sat down and ate, listening to the ocean.

Forty-five minutes later I was taken outside. There was a gang of men standing handcuffed together on one long chain. I walked to the end and held out my hands. The guard said, “Not you.” I got my own set of cuffs. Two officers put me in a squad car and we drove off.

We reached Culver City and parked in back of the courthouse. One of the policemen got out with me. We walked to the back way and sat down in the front row of the courtroom. The cop took the cuffs off. I didn’t see Timmy anywhere. There was the usual long wait for the judge. My case was second.

“You are accused of public intoxication and of blocking traffic. Ten days or thirty dollars.”

I pleaded guilty even though I didn’t know what he meant about blocking traffic. The policeman took me downstairs, sat me in the back of the squad car. “You got off easy,” he said. “You guys had traffic jammed up for a mile. It was the worst traffic jam in the history of the City of Inglewood.”

Then he drove me to L.A. County Jail.

14

That night my father arrived with the thirty dollars. As we left his eyes were moist. “You’ve disgraced your mother and myself,” he said. It seemed they knew one of the policemen who had asked him, “Mr. Chinaski, what is *your* son doing here?”

“I was so ashamed. To think, my own son in prison.”

We walked down to his car, got in. He drove off. He was still weeping. “It’s bad enough you don’t want to serve your country in time of War…”

“The shrink said I was unfit.”

“My son, if it wasn’t for the First World War I never would have met your mother and you never would have been born.”

“Do you have a cigarette?”

“Now you’ve been jailed. A thing like this could kill your mother.”

We passed some cheap bars on lower Broadway.

“Let’s go in and catch a drink.”

“What? You mean you’d dare drink right after getting out of jail for intoxication?”

“That’s when you need a drink the most.”

“Don’t you ever tell your mother you wanted a drink right after getting out of jail,” he warned me.

“I need a piece of ass too.”

“What?”

“I said, I need a piece of ass too.”

He nearly ran a red light. We drove in silence.

“By the way,” he said finally, “I guess you know that the jail fine will be added to your room, board and laundry bill?”

15

I got a job in an auto parts warehouse just off Flower Street. The manager was a tall ugly man with no ass. He always told me whenever he fucked his wife the night before.

"I fucked my wife last night. Get that Williams Brothers order first."

"We're out of K-3 flanges."

"Backorder them."

I stamped "B.O." on the packing slip and invoice.

"I fucked my wife last night."

I taped up the Williams Brothers box, labeled it, weighed it, and affixed the necessary postage.

"It was pretty good too."

He had a sandy mustache, sandy hair and no ass.

"She pissed when she finished."

16

My bill for room, board, laundry, etc., was so high by this time that it took several paychecks to get even. I stayed until then and moved out right afterwards. I couldn't afford the rates at home.

I found a rooming house near my job. Moving wasn't hard. I only owned enough to half fill a suitcase…

Mama Strader was my landlady, a dyed redhead with a good figure, many gold teeth, and an aged boyfriend. She called me into the kitchen the first morning and said she'd pour me a whiskey if I would go out back and feed the chickens. I did and then I sat in the kitchen drinking with Mama and her boyfriend, Al. I was an hour late for work.

The second night there was a knock on my door. It was a fat woman in her mid-forties. She held a bottle of wine. "I live down the hall, my name's Martha. I hear you listening to that good music all the time. I thought I'd bring you a drink."

Martha walked in. She had on a loose green smock, and after a few wines she started showing me her legs.

"I've got good legs."

"I'm a leg man."

"Look higher."

Her legs were very white, fat, flabby, with bulging purple veins. Martha told me her story.

She was a whore. She made the bars off and on. Her main source of income was the owner of a department store. "He gives me money. I go into his store and take anything I want. The salespeople don't bother me. He's told them to leave me alone. He doesn't want his wife to know I'm a better fuck than she is."

Martha got up and turned on the radio. Loud. "I'm a good dancer," she said. "Watch me dance!"

She whirled in her green tent, kicking her legs. She wasn't so hot. Soon she had the smock up around her waist and was waving her behind in my face. The pink panties had a large hole over the right cheek. Then off came the smock and she was just in her panties. Next the panties were on the floor by the smock and she was doing a grind. Her triangle of cunt hair was almost hidden by her dangling, bouncing stomach.

Sweat was making her mascara run. Suddenly her eyes narrowed. I was sitting on the edge of the bed. She leapt on me before I could move. Her open mouth was pressed on mine. It tasted of spit and onions and stale wine and (I imagined) the sperm of four hundred men. She pushed her tongue into my mouth. It was thick with saliva, I gagged and pushed her off. She fell on her knees, tore open my zipper, and in a second my soft pecker was in her mouth. She sucked and bobbed. Martha had a small yellow ribbon in her short grey hair. There were warts and big brown moles on her neck and cheeks.

My penis rose; she groaned, bit me. I screamed, grabbed her by the hair, pulled her off. I stood in the center of the room wounded and terrified. They were playing a Mahler Symphony on the radio. Before I could move she was down on her knees and on me again. She gripped my balls mercilessly with both of her hands. Her mouth opened, she had me; her head bobbed, sucked, jerked. Giving my balls a tremendous yank while almost biting my pecker in half she forced me to the floor. Sucking sounds filled the room as my radio played Mahler. I felt as if I were being eaten by a pitiless animal. My pecker rose, covered with spittle and blood. The sight of it threw her into a frenzy. I felt as if I was being eaten alive.

If I come, I thought desperately, I'll never forgive myself.

As I reached down to try to yank her off by the hair, she clutched my balls again and squeezed them without pity. Her teeth scissored midpoint on my penis as if to slice me in two. I screamed, let go of her hair, fell back. Her head bobbed remorselessly. I was certain the sucking could be heard all over the roominghouse.

"NO!" I yelled.

She persisted with inhuman fury. I began to come. It was like sucking the insides out of a trapped snake. Her fury was mixed with madness; she sucked at that sperm, gurgling it into her throat.

She continued to bob and suck.

"Martha! Stop! It's over!"

She wouldn't. It was as if she had been turned into an enormous all-devouring mouth. She continued to suck and bob. She went on, on. "NO!" I yelled again…This time she got it like a vanilla malt through a straw.

I collapsed. She rose and began dressing herself. She sang.

"*When a New York baby says goodnight*
it's early in the morning

goodnight, sweetheart
it's early in the morning

goodnight, sweetheart
milkman's on his way home…"

I staggered to my feet, clutching the front of my pants and found my wallet. I took out $5, handed it to her. She took the $5, tucked it into the front of her dress between her breasts, grabbed my balls playfully once again, squeezed, let go, and waltzed out of the room.

17

I had worked long enough to save up bus fare to somewhere else, plus a few dollars to take care of me after I arrived. I quit my job, took out a map of the United States and looked it over. I decided on New York City.

I took five pints of whiskey in my suitcase on the bus with me. Whenever somebody sat next to me and began talking I pulled out a pint and took a long drink. I got there.

The bus station in New York City was near Times Square. I walked out into the street with my old suitcase. It was evening. The people swarmed up out of the subways. Like insects, faceless, mad, they rushed upon me, into and around me, with much intensity. They spun and pushed each other; they made horrible sounds.

I stood back in a doorway and finished the last pint.

Then I walked along, pushed, elbowed, until I saw a vacancy sign on Third Avenue. The manager was an old Jewish woman. "I need a room," I told her.

"You need a good suit, my boy."

"I'm broke."

"It's a good suit, almost for nothing. My husband runs the tailor shop across the street. Come with me."

I paid for my room, put my suitcase upstairs. I went with her across the street.

"Herman, show this boy the suit."

"Ah, it's a nice suit." Herman brought it out; a dark blue, a bit worn.

"It looks too small."

"No, no, it fits good."

He came out from behind the counter with the suit. “Here. Try the coat on.” Herman helped me into it. “See? It fits…You want to try the pants?” He held the pants in front of me, from waist to toe.

“They look all right.”

“Ten dollars.”

“I’m broke.”

“Seven dollars.”

I gave Herman the seven dollars, took my suit upstairs to my room. I went out for a bottle of wine. When I got back I locked the door, undressed, made ready for my first real night’s sleep in some time.

I got into bed, opened the bottle, worked the pillow into a hard knot behind my back, took a deep breath, and sat in the dark looking out of the window. It was the first time I had been alone for five days. I was a man who thrived on solitude; without it I was like another man without food or water. Each day without solitude weakened me. I took no pride in my solitude; but I was dependent on it. The darkness of the room was like sunlight to me. I took a drink of wine.

Suddenly the room filled with light. There was a clatter and a roar. The El ran level with the window of my room. A subway train had stopped there. I looked out into a row of New York faces who looked back. The train lingered, then pulled away. It was dark. Then the room filled again with light. Again I looked into the faces. It was like a vision of hell repeated again and again. Each new trainload of faces was more ugly, demented and cruel than the last. I drank the wine.

It continued: darkness, then light; light, then darkness. I finished the wine and went out for more. I came back, undressed, got back in bed. The arrival and departure of the faces continued; I felt I was having a vision. I was being visited by hundreds of devils that the Devil Himself couldn’t tolerate. I drank more wine.

Finally I got up and took my new suit out of the closet. I slipped into the coat. It was a tight fit. The coat seemed smaller than when I was in the tailor shop. Suddenly there was a ripping sound. The coat had split open straight up the back. I took what remained of the coat off. I still had the pants. I worked my legs into them. There were buttons in the front instead of a zipper; as I tried to fasten them, the seam split in the seat. I reached in from behind and felt my shorts.

18

For four or five days I walked around. Then I got drunk for two days. I moved out of my room and into Greenwich Village. One day I read in Walter Winchell's column that O. Henry used to do all of his writing at a table in some famous writers' bar. I found the bar and went in looking for what?

It was noon. I was the only patron despite Winchell's column. There I stood alone with a large mirror, the bar, and the bartender.

"I'm sorry, sir, we can't serve you."

I was stunned, couldn't answer. I waited for an explanation.

"You're drunk."

I was probably hungover but I hadn't had a drink for twelve hours. I mumbled something about O. Henry and left.

19

It looked like a deserted store. There was a sign in the window: *Help Wanted*. I went in. A man with a thin mustache smiled at me. “Sit down.” He gave me a pen and a form. I filled out the form.

“Ah? College?”

“Not exactly.”

“We’re in advertising.”

“Oh?”

“Not interested?”

“Well, you see, I’ve been painting. A *painter*, you know? I’ve run out of money. Can’t sell the stuff.”

“We get lots of those.”

“I don’t like them either.”

“Cheer up. Maybe you’ll be famous after you’re dead.”

He went on to say the job entailed night work to begin with, but that there was always a chance to work one’s way up.

I told him that I liked night work. He said that I could begin in the subway.

20

Two old guys were waiting for me. I met them down inside the subway where the cars were parked. I was given an armful of cardboard posters and a small metal instrument that looked like a can opener. We all climbed in one of the parked cars.

“Watch me,” one of the old guys said.

He jumped up on the dusty seats, began walking along ripping out old posters with his can opener. So that’s how those things get up there, I thought. People put them there.

Each poster was held by two metal strips which had to be removed to get the new poster in. The strips were spring-tight and curved to fit the contour of the wall.

They let me try it. The metal strips resisted my efforts. They wouldn’t budge. The sharp edges cut my hands as I worked. I began to bleed. For each poster you took out there was a new poster to replace it. Each one took forever. It was endless.

“There are green bugs all over New York,” said one of the old guys after a while.

“There are?”

“Yeh. You new in New York?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you know all New York people got these green bugs?”

“No.”

“Yeh. Woman wanted to fuck me last night. I said, ‘No, baby, nothing doing.’”

“Yeh?”

“Yeh. I told her I’d do it if she gave me five bucks. It takes five bucks worth of steak to replace that jizz.”

“She give you the five bucks?”

“Nah. She offered me a can of Campbell’s mushroom soup.”

We worked our way down to the end of the car. The two old men climbed off the back, began to walk toward the next subway car parked about fifty feet up the track. We were forty feet above the ground with nothing but railroad ties to walk on. I saw it wouldn't be any trouble at all for a body to slip through and fall to the ground below.

I climbed out of the subway car and slowly started stepping from tie to tie, can opener in one hand, cardboard posters in the other. A subway car filled with passengers pulled up; the lights from the train showed the way.

The train moved off; I was in total darkness. I could neither see the ties nor the spaces between them. I waited.

The two old guys hollered from the next car: "Come on! Hurry! We got a lot of work to do!"

"Wait! I can't see!"

"We ain't got all night!"

My eyes began to adjust. Step by step I went forward, slowly. When I reached the next car I put the posters on the floor and sat down. My legs were weak.

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know."

"What is it?"

"A man can get killed up here."

"Nobody's ever fallen through yet."

"I feel like I could."

"It's all in the mind."

"I know. How do I get out of here?"

"There's a stairway right over there. But you gotta cross a lotta tracks, you gotta watch for trains."

"Yes."

"And don't step on the third rail."

"What's that?"

"That's the power. It's the gold rail. It looks like gold. You'll see it."

I got down on the tracks and began stepping over them. The two old men watched me. The gold rail was there. I stepped very high over that.

Then I half-ran half-fell down the stairway. There was a bar across the street.

21

The hours at the dog biscuit factory were from 4:30 p.m. to 1 a.m.

I was given a dirty white apron and heavy canvas gloves. The gloves were burned and had holes in them. I could see my fingers peeking through. I was given instructions by a toothless elf with a film over his left eye; the film was white-and-green with spidery blue lines.

He had been on the job nineteen years.

I advanced to my post. A whistle blew and the machinery leaped into action. Dog biscuits began to move. The dough was stamped into shape and then placed on heavy metal screens with iron edges.

I grabbed a screen, placed it in the oven behind me. I turned. There was the next screen. There was no way to slow them down. The only time they stopped was when something snagged the machinery. It didn't happen often. When it did, the Elf got it going quickly.

The flames of the oven leaped fifteen feet high. The inside of the oven was like a ferris wheel. Each ledge held twelve screens. When the oven man (me) had filled a ledge he kicked a lever which turned the wheel one notch, bringing down the next empty ledge.

The screens were heavy. Lifting one screen could tire a man. If you thought about doing it for eight hours, lifting hundreds of screens, you'd never make it. Green biscuits, red biscuits, yellow biscuits, brown biscuits, purple biscuits, blue biscuits, vitamin biscuits, vegetable biscuits.

On such jobs men become tired. They experience a weariness beyond fatigue. They say mad, brilliant things. Out of my head, I cussed and talked and cracked jokes and sang. Hell boils with laughter. Even the Elf laughed at me.

I worked for several weeks. I came in drunk each night. It didn't matter; I had the job nobody wanted. After an hour at the oven I was sober. My hands were blistered and burned. Each day I sat aching in my room pricking my blisters with pins I first sterilized with matches.

One night I was drunker than usual. I refused to punch in. "This is it," I told them.

The Elf was in trauma. "How will we make it, Chinaski?"

"Ah."

"*Give us one more night!*"

I got his head in the crook of my arm, squeezed; his ears turned pink. "Little bastard," I said. Then I let him go.

22

After arriving in Philadelphia I found a roominghouse and paid a week's rent in advance. The nearest bar was fifty years old. You could smell the odor of urine, shit and vomit of a half century as it came up through the floor into the bar from the restrooms below.

It was 4:30 in the afternoon. Two men were fighting in the center of the bar.

The guy to the right of me said his name was Danny. To the left, he said his name was Jim.

Danny had a cigarette in his mouth, end glowing. An empty beerbottle looped through the air. It missed his cigarette and nose, fractionally. He didn't move or look around, tapped the ashes of his cigarette into a tray. "That was pretty close, you son of a bitch! Come that close again, you got a fight on your hands!"

Every seat was taken. There were women in there, a few housewives, fat and a bit stupid, and two or three ladies who had fallen on hard times. As I sat there one girl got up and left with a man. She was back in five minutes.

"Helen! Helen! How do you do it?"

She laughed.

Another jumped up to try her. "That must be good. I gotta have some!"

They left together. Helen was back in five minutes.

"She must have a suction pump for a pussy!"

"I gotta try me some of that," said an old guy down at the end of the bar. "I haven't had a hard-on since Teddy Roosevelt took his last hill."

It took Helen ten minutes with that one.

"I want a sandwich," said a fat guy. "Who's gonna run me an errand for a sandwich?"

I told him I would. "Roast beef on a bun, everything on."

He gave me some money. "Keep the change."

I walked down to the sandwich place. An old geezer with a big belly walked up. "Roast beef on a bun to go, everything on. And a bottle of beer while I'm waiting."

I drank the beer, took the sandwich back to the fat guy in the bar, and found another seat. A shot of whiskey appeared. I drank it down. Another appeared. I drank it down. The juke box played.

A young fellow of about twenty-four came down from the end of the bar. "I need the venetian blinds cleaned," he said to me.

"You sure do."

"What do you do?"

"Nothing. Drink. Both."

"How about the blinds?"

"Five bucks."

"You're hired."

They called him Billy-Boy. Billy-Boy had married the owner of the bar. She was forty-five.

He brought me two buckets, some suds, rags and sponges. I took the blinds down, removed the slats, and began.

"Drinks are free," said Tommy the night bartender, "as long as you're working."

"Shot of whiskey, Tommy."

It was slow work; the dust had caked, turned into embedded grime. I cut my hands several times on the edges of the metal slats. The soapy water burned.

"Shot of whiskey, Tommy."

I finished one set of blinds and hung them up. The patrons of the bar turned to look at my work.

"Beautiful!"

"It sure helps the place."

"They'll probably raise the price of drinks."

"Shot of whiskey, Tommy," I said.

I took down another set of blinds, pulled out the slats. I beat Jim at the pinball machine for a quarter, then emptied the buckets in the crapper and got fresh water.

The second set went slower. My hands collected more cuts. I doubt that those blinds had been cleaned in ten years. I won another quarter at the pinball then Billy-Boy hollered at me to go back to work.

Helen walked by on her way to the women's crapper.

"Helen, I'll give you five bucks when I'm finished. Will that cover?"

"Sure, but you won't be able to get it up after all that work."

"I'll get it up."

"I'll be here at closing. If you can still stand up, then you can have it for nothing!"

"I'll be standing *tall*, baby."

Helen walked back to the crapper.

"Shot of whiskey, Tommy."

"Hey, take it easy," said Billy-Boy, "or you'll never finish that job tonight."

"Billy, if I don't finish you keep your five."

"It's a deal. All you people hear that?"

"We heard you, Billy, you cheap ass."

"One for the road, Tommy."

Tommy gave me the whiskey. I drank it and went to work. I drove myself on. After a number of whiskeys I had the three sets of blinds up and shining.

"All right, Billy, pay up."

"You're not finished."

"What?"

"There's three more windows in the back room."

"The back room?"

"The back room. The party room."

Billy-Boy showed me the back room. There were three more windows, three more sets of blinds.

"I'll settle for two-fifty, Billy."

"No, you got to do them all or no pay."

I got my buckets, dumped the water, put in clean water, soap, then took down a set of blinds. I pulled the slats out, put them on a table and stared at them.

Jim stopped on his way to the crapper. "What's the matter?"

"I can't go another slat."

When Jim came out of the crapper he went to the bar and brought back his beer. He began cleaning the blinds.

"Jim, forget it."

I went to the bar, got another whiskey. When I got back one of the girls was taking down a set of blinds. "Be careful, don't cut yourself," I told her.

A few minutes later there were four or five people back there talking and laughing, even Helen. They were all working on the blinds. Soon nearly everybody in the bar was back there. I worked in two more whiskeys. Finally the blinds were finished and hanging. It hadn't taken very long. They sparkled. Billy-Boy came in: "I don't have to pay you."

"The job's finished."

"But you didn't finish it."

"Don't be a cheap shit, Billy," somebody said.

Billy-Boy dug out the $5 and I took it. We moved to the bar. "A drink for everybody!" I laid the $5 down. "And one for me too."

Tommy went around pouring drinks.

I drank my drink and Tommy picked up the $5.

"You owe the bar $3.15."

"Put it on the tab."

"O.K., what's your last name?"

"Chinaski."

"You heard the one about the Polack who went to the outhouse?"

"Yes."

Drinks came my way until closing time. After the last one I looked around. Helen had slipped out. Helen had lied.

Just like a bitch, I thought, afraid of the long hard ride…

I got up and walked back to my roominghouse. The moonlight was bright. My footsteps echoed in the empty street and it sounded as if somebody was following me. I looked around. I was mistaken. I was quite alone.

23

When I arrived in St. Louis it was very cold, about to snow, and I found a room in a nice clean place, a room on the second floor, in the back. It was early evening and I was having one of my depressive fits so I went to bed early and somehow managed to sleep.

When I awakened in the morning it was very cold. I was shivering uncontrollably. I got up and found that one of the windows was open. I closed the window and went back to bed. I began to feel nauseated. I managed to sleep another hour, then awakened. I got up, dressed, barely made it to the hall bathroom and vomited. I undressed and got back into bed. Soon there was a knock on the door. I didn't answer. The knocking continued. "Yes?" I asked.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"Can we come in?"

"Come in."

There were two girls. One was a bit on the fat side but scrubbed, shining, in a flowery pink dress. She had a kind face. The other wore a wide tight belt that accentuated her very good figure. Her hair was long, dark, and she had a cute nose; she wore high heels, had perfect legs, and wore a white low cut blouse. Her eyes were dark brown, very dark, and they kept looking at me, amused, very amused. "I'm Gertrude," she said, "and this is Hilda."

Hilda managed to blush as Gertrude moved across the room toward my bed. "We heard you in the bathroom. Are you sick?"

"Yes. But it's nothing serious, I'm sure. An open window."

"Mrs. Downing, the landlady, is making you some soup."

"No, it's all right."

"It'll do you good."

Gertrude moved nearer my bed. Hilda remained where she was, pink and scrubbed and blushing. Gertrude pivoted back and forth on her very high heels. "Are you new in town?"

"Yes."

"You're not in the army?"

"No."

"What do you do?"

"Nothing."

"No work?"

"No work."

"Yes," said Gertrude to Hilda, "look at his hands. He has the most beautiful hands. You can see that he has never worked."

The landlady, Mrs. Downing, knocked. She was large and pleasant. I imagined that her husband was dead and that she was religious. She carried a large bowl of beef broth, holding it high in the air. I could see the steam rising. I took the bowl. We exchanged pleasantries. Yes, her husband was dead. She was very religious. There were crackers, plus salt and pepper.

"Thank you."

Mrs. Downing looked at both of the girls. "We'll all be going now. We hope you get well soon. And I hope the girls haven't bothered you too much?"

"Oh no!" I grinned into the broth. She liked that.

"Come on, girls."

Mrs. Downing left the door open. Hilda managed one last blush, gave me the tiniest smile, then left. Gertrude remained. She watched me spoon the broth in. "Is it good?"

"I want to thank all you people. All this…is very unusual."

"I'm going." She turned and walked very slowly toward the door. Her buttocks moved under her tight black skirt; her legs were golden. At the doorway she stopped and turned, rested her dark eyes on me once again, held me. I was transfixed, glowing. The moment she felt my response she tossed her head and laughed. She had a lovely neck, and all that dark hair. She walked off down the hall, leaving the door ajar.

I took the salt and pepper, seasoned the broth, broke the crackers into it, and spooned it into my illness.

24

I found a job as a shipping clerk in a ladies' dresswear shop. Even during World War II when there was supposed to be a manpower shortage there were four or five applicants for each job. (At least for the menial jobs.) We waited with our application forms filled out. Born? Single? Married? Draft status? Last job? Last jobs? Why did you leave? I had filled out so many job forms that long ago I had memorized the right answers. Having gotten out of bed quite late that morning I was the last to be called. A bald man with strange tufts of hair over each ear interviewed me.

"Yes?" he asked, looking at me over the sheet.

"I'm a writer temporarily down on my inspirations."

"Oh, a *writer*, eh?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"No, I'm not."

"What do you write?"

"Short stories mostly. And I'm halfway through a novel."

"A novel, eh?"

"Yes."

"What's the name of it?"

"'The Leaky Faucet of My Doom.'"

"Oh, I like that. What's it about?"

"Everything."

"Everything? You mean, for instance, it's about cancer?"

"Yes."

"How about my wife?"

"She's in there too."

You don’t say. Why do you want to work in a ladies’ dress shop?”

“I’ve always liked ladies in ladies’ dresses.”

“Are you 4-F?”

“Yes.”

“Let me see your draft card.”

I showed him my draft card. He handed it back.

“You’re hired.”

25

We were down in a cellar. The walls were painted yellow. We packed our ladies' dresses into oblong cardboard boxes about three feet long and a foot or a foot and a half wide. A certain skill was needed in folding each dress so that it did not become creased in the carton. To prevent this we used cardboard fillers and tissue, and were given careful instructions. The U.S. Mail was used for out of town deliveries. We each had our own scale and our own postage meter machine. No smoking.

Larabee was the head shipping clerk. Klein was the assistant head shipping clerk. Larabee was the boss. Klein was trying to move Larabee out of his job. Klein was Jewish and the owners of the store were Jewish and Larabee was nervous. Klein and Larabee argued and fought all day long and on into the evenings. Yes, evenings. The problem, as it was in those days during the war, was overtime. Those in control always preferred to overwork a few men continually, instead of hiring more people so everyone might work less. You gave the boss eight hours, and he always asked for more. He never sent you home after six hours, for example. You might have time to think.

26

Whenever I went out into the hall of the roominghouse Gertrude seemed to be standing there. She was perfect, pure maddening sex, and she knew it, and she played on it, dripped it, and allowed you to suffer for it. It made her happy. I didn't feel too bad either. She could easily have shut me out and not even have allowed me to be warmed by a glimpse of it. Like most men in that situation I realized that I wouldn't get anything out of her—intimate talks, exciting roller-coaster rides, long Sunday afternoon walks—until after I had made some odd promises.

"You're a strange guy. You stay alone a lot, don't you?"

"Yes."

"What's wrong?"

"I was sick long before that morning you met me."

"Are you sick now?"

"No."

"Then what's wrong?"

"I don't like people."

"Do you think that's right?"

"Probably not."

"Will you take me to a movie some night?"

"I'll try."

Gertrude swayed in front of me; she swayed on her high heels. She moved forward. Bits of her were touching me. I simply couldn't respond. There was a space between us. The distance was too great. I felt as if she was talking to a person who had vanished, a person who was no longer there, no longer alive. Her eyes seemed to look right through me. I couldn't make a connection with her. I didn't feel shame for that, only rather embarrassed, and helpless.

"Come with me."

"What?"

"I want to show you my bedroom."

I followed Gertrude down the hall. She opened her bedroom door and I followed her in. It was a very feminine room. The large bed was covered with stuffed animals. All of the animals looked surprised and stared at me: giraffes, bears, lions, dogs. The air was perfumed. Everything was neat and clean and looked soft and comfortable. Gertrude moved close to me.

"You like my bedroom?"

"It's nice. Oh yes, I like it."

"Don't ever tell Mrs. Downing that I asked you in here, she'd be scandalized."

"I won't tell."

Gertrude stood there, silently.

"I have to go," I told her finally. Then I went to the door, opened it, closed it behind me, and walked back to my room.

27

After losing several typewriters to pawnbrokers I simply gave up the idea of owning one. I printed out my stories by hand and sent them out that way. I hand-printed them with a pen. I got to be a very fast hand-printer. It got so that I could hand-print faster than I could write. I wrote three or four short stories a week. I kept things in the mail. I imagined the editors of *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's* saying: "Hey, here's another one of those things by that nut…"

One night I took Gertrude to a bar. We sat at a table to one side and drank beer. It was snowing outside. I felt a little better than usual. We drank and talked. An hour or so passed. I began gazing into Gertrude's eyes and she looked right back. "*A good man, nowadays, is hard to find!*" said the juke box. Gertrude moved her body to the music, moved her head to the music, and looked into my eyes.

"You have a very strange face," she said. "You're not really ugly."

"Number four shipping clerk, working his way up."

"Have you ever been in love?"

"Love is for real people."

"You sound real."

"I dislike real people."

"You dislike them?"

"I hate them."

We drank some more, not saying much. It continued to snow. Gertrude turned her head and stared into the crowd of people. Then she looked at me.

"Isn't he *handsome?*"

"Who?"

"That soldier over there. He's sitting alone. He sits so *straight*. And he's got all his medals on."

"Come on, let's get out of here."

"But it's not late."

"You can stay."

"No, I want to go with *you*."

"I don't care what you do."

"Is it the soldier? Are you mad because of the soldier?"

"Oh, shit!"

"It was the soldier!"

"I'm going."

I stood up at the table, left a tip and walked toward the door. I heard Gertrude behind me. I walked down the street in the snow. Soon she was walking at my side.

"You didn't even get a taxi. These high heels in the snow!"

I didn't answer. We walked the four or five blocks to the rooming house. I went up the steps with her beside me. Then I walked down to my room, opened the door, closed it, got out of my clothes and went to bed. I heard her throw something against the wall of her room.

28

I kept hand-printing my short stories. I sent most of them to Clay Gladmore, whose New York mag *Frontfire* I admired. They only paid $25 a story but Gladmore had discovered William Saroyan and many others, had been Sherwood Anderson's buddy. Gladmore returned many of my things with personal rejections. True, most of them weren't very long but they did seem kind and they were encouraging. The larger magazines used printed rejection slips. Even Gladmore's printed slips seemed to have some warmth to them: "We regret, alas, that this is a rejection slip but…"

So I kept Gladmore busy with four or five stories a week. Meanwhile I was in ladies's dresswear, down in the cellar. Klein still hadn't ousted Larabee; Cox, the other shipping clerk, didn't care who was ousted as long as he could sneak his smoke on the stairway every twenty-five minutes.

Overtime became automatic. I drank more and more in my off hours. The eight hour day was gone forever. In the morning when you walked in you might as well settle for at least eleven hours. This included Saturdays, which used to be half-days, but which had turned into full days. The war was on but the ladies were buying the hell out of dresses…

It was after one twelve hour day. I had gotten into my coat, had come up out of the cellar, had lighted a cigarette and was walking along the hallway toward the exit when I heard the boss's voice: "Chinaski!"

"Yes?"

"Step in here."

My boss was smoking a long expensive cigar. He looked well-rested.

“This is my friend, Carson Gentry.”

Carson Gentry was also smoking a long expensive cigar.

“Mr. Gentry is a writer too. He is very interested in writing. I told him that you were a writer and he wanted to meet you. You don’t mind, do you?”

“No I don’t mind.”

They both sat there looking at me and smoking their cigars. Several minutes passed. They inhaled, exhaled, looked at me.

“Do you mind if I leave?” I asked.

“It’s all right,” said my boss.

29

I always walked to my room, it was six or seven blocks away. The trees along the streets were all alike: small, twisted, half-frozen, leafless. I liked them. I walked along under the cold moon.

That scene in the office stayed with me. Those cigars, the fine clothes. I thought of good steaks, long rides up winding driveways that led to beautiful homes. Ease. Trips to Europe. Fine women. Were they that much more clever than I? The only difference was money, and the desire to accumulate it.

I'd do it too! I'd save my pennies. I'd get an idea, I'd spring a loan. I'd hire and fire. I'd keep whiskey in my desk drawer. I'd have a wife with size 40 breasts and an ass that would make the paperboy on the corner come in his pants when he saw it wobble. I'd cheat on her and she'd know it and keep silent in order to live in my house with my wealth. I'd fire men just to see the look of dismay on their faces. I'd fire women who didn't deserve to be fired.

That was all a man needed: hope. It was lack of hope that discouraged a man. I remembered my New Orleans days, living on two five-cent candy bars a day for weeks at a time in order to have leisure to write. But starvation, unfortunately, didn't improve art. It only hindered it. A man's soul was rooted in his stomach. A man could write much better after eating a porterhouse steak and drinking a pint of whiskey than he could ever write after eating a nickel candy bar. The myth of the starving artist was a hoax. Once you realized that everything was a hoax you got wise and began to bleed and burn your fellow man. I'd build an empire upon the broken bodies and lives of helpless men, women, and children—I'd shove it to them all the way. *I'd show them!*

I was at my rooming house. I walked up the stairway to the door of my room. I unlocked the door, turned on the light. Mrs. Downing had put the mail by my door. There was a large brown envelope from Gladmore. I picked it up. It was heavy with rejected manuscripts. I sat down and opened the envelope.

Dear Mr. Chinaski:

> We are returning these four stories but we are keeping *My Beerdrunk Soul is Sadder Than All The Dead Christmas Trees Of The World*. We have been watching your work for a long time and we are most happy to accept this story.

Sincerely,
Clay Gladmore.

I got up from the chair still holding my acceptance slip. MY FIRST. From the number one literary magazine in America. Never had the world looked so good, so full of promise. I walked over to the bed, sat down, read it again. I studied each curve in the handwriting of Gladmore's signature. I got up, walked the acceptance slip over to the dresser, propped it there. Then I undressed, turned out the lights and went to bed. I couldn't sleep. I got up, turned on the light, walked over to the dresser and read it again:

Dear Mr. Chinaski…

30

I often saw Gertrude in the hall. We talked but I didn't ask her out again. She stood very close to me, gently swaying, now and then staggering, as if drunk, upon her very high heels. One Sunday morning I found myself on the front lawn with Gertrude and Hilda. The girls made snowballs, laughed and screamed, threw them at me. Never having lived in snow country I was slow at first but I soon found out how to make a snowball and hurl it. Gertrude fired up, screamed. She was delicious. She was all flare and lightning. For a moment I felt like walking across the lawn and grabbing her. Then I gave up, walked away down the street with the snowballs whizzing past me.

Tens of thousands of young men were fighting in Europe and China, in the Pacific Islands. When they came back she'd find one. She wouldn't have any problem. Not with that body. Not with those eyes. Even Hilda wouldn't have any difficulty.

I began to feel that it was time for me to leave St. Louis. I decided to go back to Los Angeles; meanwhile I kept handprinting short stories by the score, got drunk, listened to Beethoven's Fifth, Brahm's Second…

One particular night after work I stopped at a local bar. I sat and drank five or six beers, got up and walked the block or so to my roominghouse. Gertrude's door was open as I walked past. "Henry…"

"Hello." I walked up to the door, looked at her. "Gertrude, I'm leaving town. I gave notice at work today."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"You people have been nice to me."

"Listen, before you leave I want you to meet my boyfriend."

"Your boyfriend?"

"Yes, he just moved in, right down the hall."

I followed her. She knocked and I stood behind her. The door opened: grey and white striped pants; long-sleeved checked shirt; necktie. A thin moustache. Vacant eyes. Out of one of his nostrils streamed a nearly invisible thread of snot that had finally gathered into a little gleaming ball. The ball had settled in the moustache and was gathering to drip off, but meanwhile it sat there and reflected the light.

"Joey," she said, "I want you to meet Henry."

We shook hands. Gertrude went in. The door closed. I walked back to my room and began packing. Packing was always a good time.

31

When I got back to Los Angeles I found a cheap hotel just off Hoover Street and stayed in bed and drank. I drank for some time, three or four days. I couldn't get myself to read the want ads. The thought of sitting in front of a man behind a desk and telling him that I wanted a job, that I was qualified for a job, was too much for me. Frankly, I was horrified by life, at what a man had to do simply in order to eat, sleep, and keep himself clothed. So I stayed in bed and drank. When you drank the world was still out there, but for the moment it didn't have you by the throat.

I got out of bed one night, dressed and walked up town. I found myself on Alvarado Street. I walked along until I came to an inviting bar and went in. It was crowded. There was only one seat left at the bar. I sat in it. I ordered a scotch and water. To my right sat a rather dark blonde, gone a bit to fat, neck and cheeks now flabby, obviously a drunk; but there was a certain lingering beauty to her features, and her body still looked firm and young and well-shaped. In fact, her legs were long and lovely. When the lady finished her drink I asked her if she wanted another. She said yes. I bought her one.

"Buncha damn fools in here," she said.

"Everywhere, but especially in here," I said.

I paid for three or four more rounds. We didn't speak. Then I told the lady, "That drink was it. I'm broke."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

"Do you have a place to stay?"

"An apartment, two or three days left on the rent."

"And you don't have any money? Or anything to drink?"

"No."

"Come with me."

I followed her out of the bar. I noticed that she had a very nice behind. I walked with her to the nearest liquor store. She told the clerk what she wanted: two fifths of Grandad, a sixpack of beer, two packs of cigarettes, some chips, some mixed nuts, some alka-seltzer, a good cigar. The clerk tabbed it up. "Charge it," she said, "to Wilbur Oxnard." "Wait," he said, "I'll have to phone." The clerk dialed a number and spoke over the phone. Then he hung up. "It's all right," he said. I helped her with her bags and we walked out.

"Where are we going with this stuff?"

"To your place. Do you have a car?"

I took her to my car. I had bought one off a lot in Compton for thirty-five dollars. It had broken springs and a leaking radiator, but it ran.

We got to my place and I put the stuff in the refrigerator, poured two drinks, brought them out, sat down and lit my cigar. She sat on the couch across from me, her legs crossed. She had on green earrings. "Swell," she said.

"What?"

"You think you're Swell, you think you're Hot Shit!"

"No."

"Yes, you do. I can tell by the way you act. I still like you. I liked you right off."

"Pull your dress a little higher."

"You like legs?"

"Yeh. Pull your dress a little higher."

She did. "Oh, Jesus, now higher, higher yet!"

"Listen, you're not some kind of nut, are you? There's one guy been bothering the girls, he picks them up, then takes them to his place, strips them down and cuts crossword puzzles into their bodies with a pen knife."

"I'm not him."

"Then there are guys who fuck you and then chop you up into little pieces. They find part of your asshole stuffed up a drainpipe in Playa Del Rey and your left tit in a trashcan down at Oceanside…”

“I stopped doing that years ago. Lift your skirt higher.”

She hiked her skirt higher. It was like the beginning of life and laughter, it was the real meaning of the sun. I walked over, sat on the couch next to her and kissed her. Then I got up, poured two more drinks and tuned the radio in to KFAC. We caught the beginning of something by Debussy.

“You like that kind of music?” she asked.

Some time during the night as we were talking I fell off the couch. I lay on the floor and looked up those beautiful legs. “Baby,” I said, “I’m a genius but nobody knows it but me.”

She looked down at me. “Get up off the floor you damn fool and get me a drink.”

I brought her drink and curled up next to her. I did feel foolish. Later we got into bed. The lights were off and I got on top of her. I stroked once or twice, stopped. “What’s your name, anyhow?”

“What the hell difference does it make?” she answered.

32

Her name was Laura. It was 2 o'clock in the afternoon and I walked along the path behind the furniture shop on Alvarado Street. I had my suitcase with me. There was a large white house back there, wooden, two stories, old, the white paint peeling. "Now stay back from the door," she said. "There's a mirror halfway up the stairs that allows him to see who's at the door."

Laura stood there ringing the bell while I hid to the right of the door. "Let him just see me, and when the buzzer sounds, I'll push the door open and you follow me in."

The buzzer rang and Laura pushed the door open. I followed her in, leaving my suitcase at the bottom of the stairs. Wilbur Oxnard stood at the top of the stairway and Laura ran up to him. Wilbur was an old guy, grey-haired, with one arm. "Baby, so *good* to see you!" Wilbur put his one arm around Laura and kissed her. When they separated he saw me.

"Who's that guy?"

"Oh, Willie, I want you to meet a friend of mine."

"Hi," I said.

Wilbur didn't answer me. "Wilbur Oxnard, Henry Chinaski," Laura introduced us.

"Good to know you, Wilbur," I said.

Wilbur still didn't answer. Finally he said, "Well, come on up."

I followed Wilbur and Laura across the front room. There were coins all over the floor, nickels, dimes, quarters, halves. An electric organ sat in the very center of the room. I followed them into the kitchen where we sat down at the breakfastnook table. Laura introduced me to the two women who sat there.

"Henry, this is Grace and this is Jerry. Girls, this is Henry Chinaski."

"Hello, there," said Grace.

"How are you doing?" asked Jerry.

"My pleasure, ladies."

They were drinking whiskey with beer chasers. A bowl was in the center of the table filled with black and green olives, chili peppers, and celery hearts. I reached out and got a chili pepper. "Help yourself," Wilbur said, waving toward the whiskey bottle. He'd already put a beer down in front of me. I poured a drink.

"What do you do?" asked Wilbur.

"He's a writer," said Laura. "He's been printed in the magazines."

"Are you a writer?" Wilbur asked me.

"Sometimes."

"I need a writer. Are you a good one?"

"Every writer thinks he's a good one."

"I need somebody to do the libretto for an opera I've written. It's called 'The Emperor of San Francisco.' Did you know there was once a guy who wanted to be the Emperor of San Francisco?"

"No, no, I didn't."

"It's very interesting. I'll give you a book on it."

"All right."

We sat quietly a while, drinking. All the girls were in their mid-thirties, attractive and very sexy, and they knew it.

"How do you like the curtains?" he asked me. "The girls made these curtains for me. The girls have a lot of talent."

I looked at the curtains. They were sickening. Huge red strawberries all over them, surrounded by dripping stems.

"I like the curtains," I told him.

Wilbur got out some more beer and we all had more drinks from the whiskey bottle. "Don't worry," said Wilbur, "there's another bottle when this one's gone."

"Thanks, Wilbur."

He looked at me. “My arm’s getting stiff.” He lifted his arm and moved his fingers. “I can hardly move my fingers, I think I’m going to die. The doctors can’t figure out what’s wrong. The girls think I’m kidding, the girls laugh at me.”

“I don’t think you’re kidding,” I told him, “I believe you.”

We had a couple of drinks more.

“I like you,” said Wilbur, “you look like you’ve been around, you look like you’ve got class. Most people don’t have class. You’ve got class.”

“I don’t know anything about class,” I said, “but I’ve been around.”

“Let’s go into the other room. I want to play you a few choruses from the opera.”

“Fine,” I said.

We opened a new fifth, got out somé more beer, and went into the other room. “Don’t you want me to make you some soup, Wilbur?” asked Grace.

“Who ever heard of eating soup at the organ?” he answered.

We all laughed. We all liked Wilbur.

“He throws money on the floor every time he gets drunk,” Laura whispered to me. “He says nasty things to us and throws coins at us. He says it’s what we’re worth. He can get very nasty.”

Wilbur got up, went to his bedroom, came out wearing a sailing cap, and sat back down at the organ. He began playing the organ with his one arm and his bad fingers. He played a very loud organ. We sat there drinking and listening to the organ. When he finished, I applauded.

Wilbur turned around on the stool. “The girls were up here the other night,” he said, “and then somebody hollered ‘RAID!’ You should have seen them running, some of them naked, some of them in panties and bras, they all ran out and hid in the garage. It was funny as hell. I sat up here and they came drifting back, one by one, from the garage. It was sure *funny!*”

“Who hollered ‘RAID’?” I asked.

“I did,” he said.

Then he stood up and walked into his bedroom and began undressing. I could see him sitting on the edge of his bed in his underwear. Laura walked in and sat on the bed with him and kissed him. Then she came out and Grace and Jerry went in. Laura motioned to the bottom of the stairway. I went down for my suitcase and brought it back up.

33

When we awakened, Laura told me about Wilbur. It was 9:30 a.m. and there wasn't a sound in the house. "He's a millionaire," she said, "don't let this old house fool you. His grandfather bought land all around here and his father did too. Grace is his girl but Grace gives him a rough time. And he's a tight son of a bitch. He likes to take care of the girls in the bars who have no place to sleep. But all he gives them is food and a bed, never any money. And they only get drinks when *he's* drinking. Jerry got to him one night, though. He was horny and chasing her around the table and she said, 'No, no no, not unless you give me fifty bucks a month for life!' He finally signed a piece of paper and do you know it held up in court? He has to pay her fifty bucks a month, and it's fixed so that when he dies his family will have to pay her."

"Good," I said.

"Grace is his main girl, though."

"How about you?"

"Not for a long time."

"That's good, because I like you."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Now, you watch. If he comes out this morning with his sailor cap on, that captain's cap, that means we're going out on the yacht. The doctor told him to get a yacht for his health."

"Is it a big one?"

"Sure. Listen, did you pick up all those coins off the floor last night?"

"Yes," I said.

"It's better to take some and leave some."

"I guess you're right. Should I put some back?"

"If you get a chance."

I started to get up to get dressed when Jerry ran into the bedroom. "He's standing in front of the mirror adjusting his cap to the proper angle. We're going out on the yacht!"

"O.K., Jerry," said Laura.

We both began to get dressed. We were just in time. Wilbur didn't speak. He was hungover. We followed him down the stairway and into the garage where we got into an unbelievably old car. It was so old it had a rumble seat. Grace and Jerry got into the front seat with Wilbur and I got into the rumble seat with Laura. Wilbur backed out the driveway, headed south on Alvarado, and we were on our way to San Pedro.

"He's hungover and he's not drinking and when he's not drinking he doesn't want anybody else to drink either, the bastard. So watch it," said Laura.

"Hell, I need a drink."

"We all need a drink," she said. Laura took a pint from her purse and unscrewed the cap. She handed the bottle to me. "Now wait until he checks us in the rear-view mirror. Then the minute his eyes go back to the road, take a slug."

Soon I saw Wilbur's eyes looking at us in the rear-view mirror. Then he looked back at the road. I took a hit and felt much better. I handed the bottle back to Laura. She waited until Wilbur's eyes looked into the rear-view, then went back to the road. She had her turn. It was a pleasant journey. By the time we reached San Pedro the bottle was empty. Laura took out some gum, I lit a cigar, and we climbed out. As I helped Laura out of the rumble seat her skirt came up and I saw those long nylon legs, the knees, the slender ankles. I began to get horny and looked out over the water. There was the yacht: *The Oxwill*. It was the largest yacht in the harbor. A small motor boat took us out. We climbed aboard. Wilbur waved to some fellow boatmen and some wharf-rats and then he looked at me.

"How you feeling?"

"Great, Wilbur, great…like an Emperor."

"Come here, I want to show you something." We walked toward the back of the boat and Wilbur leaned down and pulled a ring. He pulled back a hatch cover. There were two motors down there. "I want to show you how to start this auxiliary motor in case anything goes wrong. It's not difficult. I can do it with one arm."

I stood there bored as Wilbur pulled at a rope. I nodded and told him that I understood. But that wasn't enough, he had to show me how to pull anchor and unmoor from the dock when all I wanted was another drink.

After all that, we pulled out and he stood there in the cabin with his sailor's cap on, steering the yacht. All the girls crowded around him.

"Oh, Willie, let me steer!"

"Willie, let *me* steer!"

I didn't ask to steer. I didn't want to steer. I followed Laura down below. It was like a luxury hotel suite, only there were bunks on the wall, no beds. We went to the refrigerator. It was filled with food and drink. We found an open fifth of whiskey and took that out. We had a bit of whiskey and water. It seemed like a decent life. Laura turned on the record player and we listened to something called "Bonaparte's Retreat." Laura looked fine. She was happy and smiling. I leaned over and kissed her, ran my hand up her leg. Then I heard the engine cut off and Wilbur came down the steps.

"We're going back in," he said. He looked quite stern in his captain's cap.

"What for?" asked Laura.

"She's gone into one of her moods. I'm afraid she'll jump overboard. She won't speak to me. She just sits there, staring. She can't swim. I'm afraid she'll jump into the ocean."

"Listen, Wilbur," said Laura, "just give her ten bucks. She's got runs in her stockings."

"No, we're going in. Besides, you people have been *drinking!*"

Wilbur went back up the steps. The engine coughed and we turned around and headed back toward San Pedro.

"This happens everytime we try to go to Catalina. Grace goes into one of her moods and sits there staring at the ocean with that scarf tied around her head. That's how she gets things out of him. She's never going to jump overboard. She hates water."

"Well," I said, "we might as well have a few more drinks. When I think about writing lyrics to Wilbur's opera I realize how disgusting my life has become."

"We might as well drink up," said Laura, "he's mad now anyhow."

Jerry came down and joined us. "Grace is sore about that fifty bucks a month I'm getting out of his ass. Hell, it ain't that easy. The minute she's gone that old son of a bitch leaps on top of me and starts pumping. He never gets enough. He's afraid he's going to die and he wants to get in as many as possible."

She drank her shot and poured another one.

"I should have stayed in personnel at Sears Roebuck. I had a good thing going."

We all drank to that.

34

By the time we docked, Grace had joined us too. She still had the scarf around her head and she wasn't talking but she was drinking. We were all drinking. We were all drinking when Wilbur came down the stairs. He stood there looking at us. "I'll be right back," he said.

That was in the afternoon. We waited and we drank. The girls started arguing about how they should handle Wilbur. I climbed into one of the bunks and went to sleep. When I awakened it was evening going into night and it was cold.

"Where's Wilbur?" I asked.

"He's not coming back," said Jerry, "he's mad."

"He'll be back," said Laura, "Grace is here."

"I don't give a damn if he never comes back," said Grace. "We got enough food and drink here to supply the whole Egyptian Army for a month."

So there I was in the biggest yacht in the harbor with three women. But it was very cold. It was the chill off the water. I got out of the bunk, got a drink, and crawled back into the bunk. "Jesus, it's cold," said Jerry, "let me get in there and warm up." She kicked off her shoes and climbed into the bunk with me. Laura and Grace were drunk and arguing about something. Jerry was small and round, very round, a sung type. She pushed against me.

"Jesus, it's cold. Put your arms around me."

"Laura…" I said.

"Fuck Laura."

"I mean, she might get mad."

"She won't get mad. We're friends. Look." Jerry sat up in the bunk. "Laura, Laura…"

"Yes?"

"Look, I'm trying to get warm. O.K.?"

"O.K.," said Laura.

Jerry snuggled back down under the covers. "See, she said it's O.K."

"All right," I said. I put my hand on her ass and kissed her.

"Just don't go too far," said Laura.

"He's just holding me," said Jerry.

I got my hand up under her dress and began working her panties down. It was difficult. By the time she kicked them off I was more than ready. Her tongue shot in and out of my mouth. We tried to look nonchalant while we did it sideways. I slipped out several times but Jerry put it back in. "Don't go too far," Laura said again. It slipped out and Jerry grabbed it and squeezed. "She's just holding me," I told Laura. Jerry giggled and put it back in. It stayed there. I got hotter and hotter. "You bitch," I whispered, "I love you." Then I came. Jerry got out of the bunk and went to the bathroom. Grace was making us roast beef sandwiches. I climbed out of the bunk and we had roast beef sandwiches, potato salad, sliced tomatoes, coffee and apple pie. We were all hungry.

"I sure got warmed up," said Jerry. "Henry's one good heating pad."

"I'm plenty cold," said Grace, "I think I'll try some of that heating pad. Do you mind, Laura?"

"I don't mind. Just don't go too far."

"How far's too far?"

"You know what I mean."

After we ate I got into the bunk and Grace climbed in with me. She was the tallest of the three. I'd never been in bed with a woman that tall. I kissed her. Her tongue answered. Women, I thought, women are magic. What marvelous beings they are! I reached up under her dress and pulled at the panties. It was a long way down. "What the hell are you doing?" she whispered. "I'm pulling your panties down." "What for?" "I'm going to fuck you." "I just want to get warm." "I'm going to fuck you." "Laura is my friend. I'm Wilbur's woman." "I'm going to fuck you." "What are you doing?" "I'm trying to get it in." "No!" "God damn it, help me." "Get it in yourself." "Help me." "Get it in by yourself. Laura's my friend." "What's that got to do with it?" "What?" "Forget it." "Listen, I'm not ready yet." "Here's my finger." "Ow, easy. Show a lady some respect." "All right, all right. Is that better?" "That's better. Higher. There. There! That's it…"

"No hanky-panky now," said Laura.

"No, I'm just warming her up."

"I wonder when Wilbur's coming back?" said Jerry.

"I don't give a damn if he never comes back," I said, getting it into Grace. She moaned. It was good. I went very slow, measuring my strokes. I didn't slip out like with Jerry. "You rotten son of a bitch," said Grace, "you bastard, Laura's my friend." "I'm fucking you," I said, "feel that thing going in and out of your body, in and out, in and out, in and out, flup flup flup." "Don't talk like that, you're making me hot." "I'm fucking you," I said, "fuck fuck fucky fuck, we're fucking, we're fucking, we're fucking. Oh, it's so *dirty*, oh it's so filthy, this fucking fucking fucking…" "God damn you, stop it." "It's getting bigger and bigger, feel it?" "Yes, yes…" "I'm going to come. Jesus Christ, I'm going to come…" I came and pulled out. "You raped me, you bastard, you raped me," she whispered. "I ought to tell Laura." "Go ahead, tell her. Think she'll believe you?" Grace climbed out of the bunk and went to the bathroom. I wiped off on the sheet, pulled up my pants and leaped out of the bunk.

"You girls know how to play dice?"

"What do you need?" asked Laura.

"I've got the dice. You girls got any money? It takes dice and money. I'll show you how. Get your money out and put it in front of you. Don't be embarrassed if you don't have much money. I don't have much money. We're all friends, aren't we?"

"Yes," said Jerry, "we're all friends."

"Yes," said Laura, "we're all friends."

Grace came out of the bathroom. “What’s that bastard doing now?”

“He’s going to show us how to play dice,” said Jerry.

“*Shoot dice* is the term. I’m going to show you girls how to *shoot dice*.”

“You are, eh?” asked Grace.

“Yeah, Grace, get your tall ass down here and I’ll show you how it works…”

An hour later I had most of the money when Wilbur Oxnard suddenly came down the steps. That’s how Willie found us when he came back—shooting craps and drunk.

“*I don’t allow gambling on this ship!*” he screamed from the bottom of the steps. Grace got off her knees, walked across the room, put her arms around him and stuck her long tongue into his mouth, then grabbed his private parts. “Where’s my Willie been, leavin’ his Gracie all alone and lonely on this big boat? I sure missed my Willie.”

Willie came into the room smiling. He sat down at the table and Grace got a new fifth of whiskey and opened it. Wilbur poured the drinks. He looked at me: “I had to go back and straighten out a few notes in the opera. You’re still going to do the libretto?”

“The libretto?”

“The words.”

‘To be truthful, Wilbur, I haven’t been thinking much about it, but if you’re really serious I’ll go to work on it.”

“I’m really serious,” he said.

“I’ll start tomorrow,” I said.

Just then Grace reached under the table and unzipped Wilbur’s fly. It was going to be a good night for all of us.

35

Grace, Laura and I were sitting at the bar in The Green Smear a few days later when Jerry walked in. “Whiskey sour,” she told the barkeep. When the drink came Jerry just stared down at it. “Listen, Grace, you weren’t there last night. I was there with Wilbur.”

“That’s all right, honey, I had a little business to take care of. I like to keep the old boy guessing.”

“Grace, he got down low, real low. Henry wasn’t there, Laura wasn’t there. He had nobody to talk to. I tried to help him.”

Laura and I had slept over at an all-night party at the bartender’s house. We’d come right from there back to the bar. I hadn’t started work on the libretto and Wilbur had been after me. He wanted me to read all the damned books. I’d long ago given up reading anything.

“He was really drinking. He got onto vodka. He started drinking straight vodka. He kept asking where you were Grace.”

“That could be love,” said Grace.

Jerry finished her whiskey sour and ordered another. “I didn’t want him to drink too much,” she said, “so when he passed out I took the bottle of vodka, poured out part of it, and filled the rest with water. But he’d already drunk a lot of that hundred proof shit. I kept telling him to come to bed…”

“Oh yeah?” said Grace.

“I kept telling him to come to bed but he wouldn’t. He was so freaked out that I had to drink too. Anyhow, I got sleepy, it got to me and I left him in that chair with his vodka.”

“You didn’t get him to bed?” asked Grace.

"No. In the morning I walked in and he was still sitting in that chair, the vodka at his side. 'Good morning, Willie,' I said. I never saw such beautiful eyes. The window was open and the sunlight was in them, all the soul."

"I know," said Grace, "Willie has beautiful eyes."

"He didn't answer me. I couldn't get him to talk. I went to the phone and called his brother, you know, the doctor who takes dope. His brother came up and looked at him and got on the phone and we sat there until two guys came up and they closed Willie's eyes and stuck a needle into him. Then we sat around and talked for a while until one of the guys looked at his watch and said, 'O.K.' and they got up and took Willie off the chair and laid him out on a stretcher. Then they carried him out of there and that was it."

"Shit," said Grace. "I'm fucked."

"You're fucked," said Jerry, "I still got my fifty a month."

"And your round, fat ass," said Grace.

"And my round, fat ass," said Jerry.

Laura and I knew we were fucked. There was no need to say it.

We all sat there at the bar attempting to think of a next move.

"I wonder," said Jerry, "if I killed him?"

"Killed him how?" I asked.

"By mixing water with his vodka. He always drank it straight. It might have been the water that killed him."

"It might have," I said.

Then I motioned to the barkeep. "Tony," I said, "will you please serve the plump little lady a vodka and water?" Grace didn't think that was very humorous.

I didn't see it happen, but the way I heard it afterwards, Grace left and went to Wilbur's house and started beating on the door, beating and screaming and beating, and the brother, the doctor, came to the door but he wouldn't let her in, he was bereaved and drugged and he wouldn't let her in but Grace wouldn't quit. The doctor didn't know Grace very well (maybe he should have for she was a fine fuck) and he went to the phone and the police came but she was wild and crazed and it took two of them to put the bracelets on her. They made a mistake and had her hands in front and she came up and then down with the handcuffs and raked open one of the cop's cheeks, opened him up, so that you could look into the side of his head and see his teeth. More cops came and they took Grace away, screaming and kicking, and after that none of us ever saw her or each other again.

36

Rows and rows of silent bicycles. Bins filled with bicycle parts. Rows and rows of bicycles hanging from the ceiling: green bikes, red bikes, yellow bikes, purple bikes, blue bikes, girls' bikes, boys' bikes, all hanging up there; the glistening spokes, the wheels, the rubber tires, the paint, the leather seats, tailights, headlights, handbrakes; hundreds of bicycles, row after row.

We got an hour for lunch. I'd eat quickly, having been up most of the night and early morning, I'd be tired, aching all over, and I found this secluded spot under the bicycles. I'd crawl down there, under three deep tiers of bicycles immaculately arranged. I'd lay there on my back, and suspended over me, precisely lined up, hung rows of gleaming silver spokes, wheel rims, black rubber tires, shiny new paint, everything in perfect order. It was grand, correct, orderly—500 or 600 bicycles stretching out over me, covering me, all in place. Somehow it was meaningful. I'd look up at them and know I had forty-five minutes of rest under the bicycle tree.

Yet I also knew with another part of me, that if I ever let go and dropped into the flow of those shiny new bicycles, I was done, finished, that I'd never be able to make it. So I just lay back and let the wheels and the spokes and the colors soothe me.

A man with a hangover should never lay flat on his back looking up at the roof of a warehouse. The wooden girders finally get to you; and the skylights—you can see the chicken wire in the glass skylights—that wire somehow reminds a man of jail. Then there's the heaviness of the eyes, the longing for just one drink, and then the sound of people moving about, you hear them, you know your hour is up, somehow you have to get on your feet and walk around and fill and pack orders…

37

She was the manager’s secretary. Her name was Carmen—but despite the Spanish name she was a blonde and she wore tight knitted dresses, high spiked heels, nylons, garter belt, her mouth was thick with lipstick, but, oh, she could shimmy, she could shake, she wobbled while bringing the orders up to the desk, she wobbled back to the office, all the boys watching every move, every twitch of her buttocks; wobbling, wiggling, wagging. I am not a lady’s man. I never have been. To be a lady’s man you have to make with the sweet talk. I’ve never been good at sweet talk. But, finally, with Carmen pressing me, I led her into one of the boxcars we were unloading at the rear of the warehouse and I took her standing up in the back of one of those boxcars. It was good, it was warm; I thought of blue sky and wide clean beaches, yet it was sad—there was definitely a lack of human feeling that I couldn’t understand or deal with. I had that knit dress up around her hips and I stood there pumping it to her, finally pressing my mouth to her heavy mouth thick with scarlet lipstick and I came between two unopened cartons with the air full of cinders and with her back pressed against the filthy splintering boxcar wall in the merciful dark.

38

We all doubled up as both stock and shipping clerks. We each filled and shipped our own orders. Management was all for pinpointing errors. And since only one man was responsible for each order from start to finish, there was no way to pass the buck. Three or four goofed up orders and you were out.

Bums and indolents, all of us working there realized our days were numbered. So we relaxed and waited for them to find out how inept we were. Meanwhile, we lived with the system, gave them a few honest hours, and drank together at night.

There were three of us. Me. And a guy called Hector Gonzalves—tall, stooped, placid. He had a lovely Mexican wife who lived with him in a large double bed on upper Hill Street. I know because I went out with him one night and we drank beer and I frightened Hector's wife. Hector and I had walked in after a drunken evening in the bars and I pulled her out of bed and kissed her in front of Hector. I figured I could out-duke him. All I had to do was to keep an eye out for the steel. I finally apologized to both of them for being such an asshole. I could hardly blame her then for not warming to me and I never went back.

The third was Alabam, a small-time thief. He stole rear-view mirrors, screws and bolts, screwdrivers, light bulbs, reflectors, horns, batteries. He stole womens' panties and bedsheets off of clotheslines, rugs out of hallways. He'd go to the markets and buy a bag of potatos, but at the bottom of the sack he'd have steaks, slices of ham, cans of anchovies. He went by the name of George Fellows. George had a nasty habit: he'd drink with me and when I was almost to the point of helplessness, he'd attack me. He wanted badly to whip my ass but he was a thin fellow and cowardly to boot. I always managed to rouse myself enough to give him a few to the gut and the side of the head which would send him bounding and staggering down the stairway, usually with some small stolen item in his pocket—my washrag, a can opener, an alarm clock, my pen, a can of pepper, or perhaps a pair of scissors.

The manager of the bike warehouse, Mr. Hansen, was red-faced, sombre, green-tongued from sucking Clorets to get the whiskey off his breath. One day he called me into the office.

"Listen, Henry, those two boys are pretty dumb, aren't they?"

"They're all right."

"But, I mean, Hector especially…he *is* dumb, really. Oh, I mean, he's *all right*, but I mean, do you think he'll ever make it?"

"Hector is all right, sir."

"You mean it?"

"Of course."

"That Alabam. He's got weasel-eyes. He probably steals six dozen bike pedals a month, don't you think?"

"I don't think so, sir. I've never seen him take anything."

"Chinaski?"

"Yes, sir?"

"I'm giving you a ten dollar a week raise."

"Thank you, sir." We shook hands. That's when I realized that he and Alabam were in cahoots and splitting it right down the middle.

39

Jan was an excellent fuck. She'd had two children but she was a most excellent fuck. We had met at an open air lunch counter —I was spending my last fifty cents on a greasy hamburger— and we struck up a conversation. She bought me a beer, gave me her phone number, and three days later I moved in to her apartment.

She had a tight pussy and she took it like it was a knife that was killing her. She reminded me of a butterfat little piglet. There was enough meanness and hostility in her to make me feel that with each thrust I was paying her back for her ill-temper. She'd had one ovary removed and claimed that she couldn't get pregnant; for only one ovary she responded generously.

Jan looked a lot like Laura—only she was leaner and prettier, with shoulder length blonde hair and blue eyes. She was strange; she was always hot in the morning with her hangovers. I was not so hot in the mornings with mine. I was a night man. But at night she was always screaming and throwing things at me: telephones, telephone books, bottles, glasses (full and empty), radios, purses, guitars, ashtrays, dictionaries, broken watch bands, alarm clocks…She was an unusual woman. But one thing I could always count on, she wanted to fuck in the mornings, very much. And I had my bicycle warehouse.

Watching the clock on a typical morning, I'd give her the first one, me gagging and spewing just a bit, trying to hide it; then getting heated, coming, rolling off. "There, now," I'd say, "I'm going to be fifteen minutes late." And she'd trot off to the bathroom, happy as a bird, clean herself, poop, look at the hair under her arms, look in the mirror, worry more about age than death, then trot and get between the sheets again as I climbed into my stained shorts, to the noise of the traffic outside on Third Street, rolling east.

"Come on back to bed, daddy," she'd say.

"Look, I just got a ten dollar raise."

"We don't have to do anything. Just lay down here beside me."

"Oh shit, kid."

"Please! Just five minutes."

"Oh, fuck."

I'd get back in. She'd pull the covers back and grab my balls. Then she'd grab my penis. "Oh, he's *so* cute!"

I'd be thinking, I wonder when I can get out of here?

"Can I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"Do you mind if I kiss him?"

"No."

I heard and felt the kisses, then felt little licks. Then I forgot all about the bicycle warehouse. Then I heard her ripping up a newspaper. I felt something being fitted over the tip of my dick. "Look," she said.

I sat up. Jan had fashioned a little paper hat and fitted it over the head of my dick. Around the brim was a little yellow ribbon. The thing stood fairly tall.

"Oh, isn't he *cute?*" she asked me.

"*He?* That's *me*."

"Oh no, that isn't you, that's *him*, you have nothing to do with him."

"I don't?"

"No. Do you mind if I kiss him again?"

"All right, it's all right. Go ahead."

Jan lifted the hat off and holding on with one hand she began kissing where the hat had been. Her eyes looked deep into mine. The tip of it entered her mouth. I fell back, damned.

40

I arrived at the bicycle warehouse at 10:30 a.m. Starting time was 8. It was morning break time and the coffee wagon was outside. The warehouse crew was out there. I walked up and ordered a coffee, large, and a jelly doughnut. I talked to Carmen, the manager's secretary, of boxcar fame. As usual Carmen was wearing a very tight knitted dress that fit her like a balloon fits the trapped air, maybe tighter. She had on layers and layers of dark red lipstick and while she talked she stood as close as possible, looking into my eyes and giggling, brushing parts of her body against me. Carmen was so aggressive that she was frightening, you wanted to run away from the pressure. Like most women, she wanted what she couldn't have any longer and Jan was draining all my semen and then some. Carmen thought I was playing sophisticated and hard to get. I leaned back clutching my jelly doughnut and she leaned into me. The break ended and we all walked inside. I visualized Carmen's lightly shit-stained panties draped over one of my toes as we lay in bed together in her shack on Main Street. Mr. Hansen, the manager, was standing outside his office: "Chinaski," he barked. I knew the sound: it was over for me.

I walked toward him and stood there. He was in a newly-pressed light tan summer suit, bow tie (green), tan shirt, with his black-and-tan shoes exquisitely shined. I was suddenly conscious of the nails in the soles of my scruffy shoes pressing up into the soles of my feet. Three buttons on my dirty shirt were missing. The zipper in my pants was jammed at half mast. My belt buckle was broken.

"Yes?" I asked.

"I'm going to have to let you go."

“O.K.”

“You’re a damned good clerk but I’m going to have to let you go.”

I was embarrassed for him.

“You’ve been showing up for work at 10:30 for 5 or 6 days now. How do you think the other workers feel about this? They work an eight hour day.”

“It’s all right. Relax.”

“Listen, when I was a kid I was a tough guy too. I used to show up for work with a black eye three or four times a month. But I made it into the job every day. On time. I worked my way up.”

I didn’t answer.

“What’s wrong? How come you can’t get in here on time?”

I had a sudden hunch that I might save my job if I gave him the right answer. “I just got married. You know how it is. I’m on my honeymoon. In the mornings I start getting into my clothes, the sun is shining through the blinds, and she drags me down onto the mattress for one last fling of turkeyneck.”

It didn’t work. “I’ll have them make out your severance check.” Hansen strode toward his office. He went inside and I heard him say something to Carmen. I had another sudden inspiration and I knocked on one of the glass panels. Hansen looked up, walked over, slid back the glass.

“Listen,” I said, “I never made it with Carmen. Honest. She’s nice, but she’s not my type. Make out my check for the whole week.”

Hansen turned back into the office. “Make out his check for a week.” It was only Tuesday. I hadn’t expected that—but then he and Alabam were splitting 20,000 bicycle pedals down the middle. Carmen walked up and handed me the check. She stood there and gave me an indifferent smile as Hansen sat down at the telephone and dialed the State Employment Office.

41

I still had my thirty-five dollar car. The horses were hot. We were hot. Jan and I knew nothing about horses, but we lucked out. In those days they carded eight races instead of nine. We had a magic formula—it was called "Harmatz in the eighth." Willie Harmatz was a better than average jock, but he had weight problems, like Howard Grant does now. Examining the charts we noticed that Harmatz usually jumped one in on the last race, usually at a good price.

We didn't go out there every day. Some mornings we were just too sick from drinking to get out of bed. Then we'd get up in the early afternoon, stop off at the liquor store, stop off for an hour or two at some bar, listen to the juke box, watch the drunks, smoke, listen to the dead laughter—it was a nice way to go.

We were lucky. We only seemed to end up at the track on the right days. "Now look," I'd tell Jan, "He isn't going to do it again…it's impossible."

And there would come Willie Harmatz, with the old stretch run, looming up at the last moment through the gloom and the booze—there would come good old Willie at 16 to one, at 8 to one, at 9 to two. Willie kept saving us long after the rest of the world had become indifferent and had quit.

The thirty-five dollar car nearly always started, that wasn't the problem; the problem was to turn the headlights on. It was always very dark after the eighth race. Jan usually insisted upon taking a bottle of port in her purse. Then we drank beer at the track and—if things were going well—we drank at the track bar, mostly scotch and water. I already had one drunk driving rap and I'd find myself driving along in a car without headlights, hardly knowing where I was.

"Don't worry, baby," I'd say, "the next hard bump we hit will turn the lights on." We had the advantage of broken springs.

"Here's a dip! Hold your hat!"

"I don't have a hat!"

I'd floor it.

POW! POW! POW!

Jan would bounce up and down, trying to hold on to her bottle of port. I'd grip the wheel and look for a bit of light on the road ahead. Hitting those bumps would always turn the lights on. Sometimes sooner, sometimes later, but we'd always get the lights on.

42

We lived on the fourth floor of an old apartment house; we had two rooms in the back. The apartment was built at the edge of a high cliff so that when you looked out the back window it seemed as if you were twelve floors up instead of four. It was very much like living on the edge of the world—a last resting place before the final big drop.

Meanwhile, our winning streak at the track had ended, as all winning streaks end. There was very little money and we were drinking wine. Port and muscatel. We had the kitchen floor lined with gallon jugs of wine, six or seven of them, and in front of them were four or five fifths, and in front of the fifths were lined up three or four pints.

"Someday," I told Jan, "when they demonstrate that the world has four dimensions instead of just three, a man will be able to go for a walk and just disappear. No burial, no tears, no illusions, no heaven or hell. People will be sitting around and they'll say, 'What happened to George?' And somebody will say, 'Well, I don't know. He said he was going out for a pack of cigarettes.'"

"Listen," said Jan, "what time is it? I want to know what time it is."

"Well, let's see, we set the clock by the radio at midnight last night. We know that it gains 35 minutes every hour. It says 7:30 p.m. right now but we know that's not right because it's not dark enough yet. O.K. That's 7 and one half hours. 7 times 35 minutes, that's 245 minutes. One half of 35 is 17 and one half. That gives us 252 and one half minutes. O.K., that's 4 hours and 42 and one half minutes we owe them so we set the clock back to 5:47. That's it 5:47. It's dinner time and we don't have anything to eat."

Our clock had been dropped and broken and I had fixed it. I took the back off and found something wrong with the main spring and the fly wheel. The only way I could get the clock to run again was to shorten and tighten the main spring. This affected the speed of the clock's hands; you could almost watch the minute hand moving.

"Let's open another jug of wine," said Jan.

We really had nothing to do but drink wine and make love.

We'd eaten everything there was to eat. At night we took walks and stole cigarettes off dashboards and out of the glove compartments of parked cars.

"Should I make some pancakes?" asked Jan.

"I don't know if I can get another one of them down."

We were out of butter and lard so Jan fried the pancakes dry. And it wasn't pancake batter—it was flour mixed with water. They came out crisp. Real crisp.

"What kind of a man am I?" I wondered aloud. "My father told me I'd end up like this! Surely I can go out and get something? I'm *going* to go out and get something…But first, a good drink."

I filled a water glass full of port wine. It was vile tasting stuff and you couldn't think about it while you drank it or you'd heave it right up. So I'd always run another film up there in the movie of my mind. I'd think of an old castle in Scotland covered with moss—drawbridges, blue water, trees, blue sky, cumulus clouds. Or, I'd think of a sexy lady pulling on a pair of silk stockings very very slowly. This time I ran the silk stockings film.

I got the wine down. "I'm going. Goodbye Jan."

"Goodbye, Henry."

I walked down the hall, down the four flights of stairs, very quietly past the manager's apartment (we were behind in the rent), and into the street. I walked down the hill. I was at Sixth and Union Streets. I crossed Sixth Street, walked east. There was a small market there. I walked past the market, then I turned and approached it again. The vegetable stand was out front. There were tomatoes, cucumbers, oranges, pineapples, and grapefruit out there. I stood looking at them. I looked into the store; one old guy in an apron. He was talking to a woman. I picked up a cucumber and stuck it in my pocket and walked off. I was about fifteen feet away when I heard:

"Hey, mister! MISTER! You come back with that CUCUMBER or I'm going to call the COPS! If you don't wanna go to JAIL you bring that CUCUMBER BACK!"

I turned and made the long walk back. There were three or four people watching. I pulled the cucumber out of my pocket and put it back on top of the stack of cucumbers. Then I walked west. I walked up Union Street, up the west side of the hill, walked back up the four flights of stairs and opened the door. Jan looked up from her drink.

"I'm a failure," I said. "I couldn't even steal a cucumber."

"It's all right."

"Put the pancakes on."

I walked to the jug and poured another drink.

...I was riding a camel across the Sahara. I had a large nose, somewhat like an eagle's beak, but yet I was very handsome, yes, in white robes with green stripes. And I had courage, I had murdered more than one. I had a large curved sword at my belt. I rode toward the tent where a fourteen year old girl blessed with great wisdom and with an unpunctured hymen was eagerly waiting on a thick oriental carpet...

The drink went down; the poison shook my body; I could smell the flour and water burning. I poured a drink for Jan, I poured another drink for me.

At some point during one of our hellish nights World War II ended. The war had always been at best a vague reality to me, but now it was over. And the jobs that had always been difficult to get became more so. I got up each morning and went to all the public employment agencies starting with the Farm Labor Market. I struggled up at 4:30 a.m., hungover, and was usually back before noon. I walked back and forth between the agencies, endlessly. Sometimes I did get an occasional day's work unloading a boxcar, but this was only after I started going to a private agency which took one third of my wages. Consequently, there was very little money and we fell further and further behind with the rent. But we kept the wine bottles lined up bravely, made love, fought, and waited.

When there was a little money we walked down to Grand Central Market to get cheap stew meat, carrots, potatoes, onions and celery. We'd put it all in a big pot and sit and talk, knowing we were going to eat, smelling it—the onions, the vegetables, the meat—listening to it bubble. We rolled cigarettes and went to bed together, and got up and sang songs. Sometimes the manager would come up and tell us to keep quiet, and remind us that we *were* behind with the rent. The tenants never complained about our fights but they didn't like our singing: *I Got Plenty Of Nothing; Old Man River; Buttons And Bows; Tumbling Along With The Tumbling Tumbleweeds; God Bless America; Deutschland über Alles; Bonaparte's Retreat; I Get The Blues When It Rains; Keep Your Sunny Side Up; No More Money In The Bank; Who's Afraid Of The Big Bad Wolf; When The Deep Purple Falls; A Tiskit A Tasket; I Married An Angel; Poor Little Lambs Gone Astray; I Want A Gal Just Like The Gal Who Married Dear Old Dad; How The Hell Ya Gonna Keep Them Down On The Farm; If I'd Known You Were Coming I'd A Baked A Cake…*

43

I was too sick one morning to get up at 4:30 a.m.—or according to our clock 7:27 and one half. I shut off the alarm and went back to sleep. A couple of hours later there was a loud noise in the hall. “What the hell is it?” asked Jan.

I got out of bed. I slept in my shorts. The shorts were stained—we wiped with newspapers that we crumpled and softened with our hands—and I often didn’t get all of it cleaned off. My shorts were also ragged and had cigarette burns in them where the hot ashes had fallen in my lap.

I went to the door and opened it. There was thick smoke in the hall. Firemen in large metal helmets with numbers on them. Firemen dragging long thick hoses. Firemen dressed in asbestos. Firemen with axes. The noise and confusion was incredible. I closed the door.

“What is it?” asked Jan.

“It’s the fire department.”

“Oh,” she said. She pulled the covers up over her head, rolled on her side. I got in beside her and slept.

44

I was finally hired on at an auto parts warehouse. It was on Flower Street, down around Eleventh Street. They sold retail out the front and also wholesaled to other distributors and shops. I had to demean myself to get that one—I told them that I liked to think of my job as a second home. That pleased them.

I was the receiving clerk. I also walked to a half dozen places in the neighborhood and picked up parts. It did get me out of the building.

During my lunch period one day I noticed an intense and intelligent looking Chicano boy reading that day’s entries in the newspaper.

“You play the horses?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Can I see your paper?”

I looked down the entries. I handed the paper back.

“My Boy Bobby ought to take the eighth.”

“I know it. And they don’t even have him on top.”

“All the better.”

“What do you think he’ll pay?”

“Around 9 to 2.”

“I wish I could get a bet down.”

“Me too.”

“When’s the last race go off at Hollywood Park?” he asked.

“‘5:30.”

“We get out of here at 5:00.”

“We’d never make it.”

“We could try. My Boy Bobby’s going to win.”

“Just our luck.”

“Want to come along?”

"Sure."

"Watch the clock. At 5:00 we'll cut out."

At five minutes to 5:00 we were both working as near the rear exit as possible. My friend, Manny, looked at his watch. "We'll steal two minutes. When I start running, follow me."

Manny stood there putting boxes of parts on a rear shelf. Suddenly he bolted. I was right behind him and we were out the rear door in a flash, then down the alley. He was a good runner. I found out afterwards that he had been an all-city quarter-miler in high school. I was four feet behind him all the way down the alley. His car was parked around the corner; he unlocked it and we were in and off.

"Manny, we'll never make it."

"We'll make it. I can tool this thing."

"We must be nine or ten miles away. We've got to get there, park, then get from the parking lot to the betting window."

"I can tool this thing. We'll make it."

"We can't stop for the red lights."

Manny had a fairly new car and he knew how to switch lanes. "I've played every track in this country."

"Caliente too?"

"Yes, Caliente. The bastards take twenty-five per cent."

"I know."

"It's worse in Germany. In Germany the take is fifty per cent."

"And they still get players?"

"They still get players. The suckers figure all they got to do is find the winner."

"We're bucking sixteen per cent, that's rough enough."

"Rough. But a good player can beat the take."

"Yes."

"Shit, a red light!"

"Fuck it. Go on through."

"I'm going to hang a right." Manny abruptly switched lanes and cut right at the signal. "Watch out for squad cars."

"Right." Manny could really tool that thing. If he could bet horses like he drove, Manny was a winner.

“You married, Manny?”

“No way.”

“Women?”

“Sometimes. But it never lasts.”

“What’s the problem?”

“A woman is a full-time job. You have to choose your profession.”

“I suppose there is an emotional drain.”

“Physical too. They want to fuck night and day.”

“Get one you like to fuck.”

“Yes, but if you drink or gamble they think it’s a put-down of their love.”

“Get one who likes to drink, gamble and fuck.”

“Who wants a woman like that?”

Then we were in the parking lot. Parking was free after the seventh race. Track admission also was free. Not having a program or a racing form was a problem, though. If there were any scratches you couldn’t be sure which horse on the tote board was yours.

Manny locked the car. We started running. Manny opened up six lengths on me in the parking lot. We ran through an open gate and down into the tunnel. Manny held his six lengths through the tunnel, which at Hollywood Park is a long one. Coming out of the tunnel and into the track proper, I closed up on Manny until I was only five lengths back. I could see the horses at the gate. We sprinted toward the betting windows.

“My Boy Bobby…what’s his number?” I yelled at a man with one leg as we ran past. Before he could answer I could no longer hear him. Manny ran toward the five dollar win window. When I got there he had his ticket. “What’s his number?” “8! It’s the 8 horse!” I got my $5 down and got the ticket as the bell rang shutting off the mutual machines and starting the horses out of the gate.

Bobby read 4 on the board off a 6 to one morning line. The 3 horse was the 6 to 5 favorite. It was an $8,000 claimer, a mile and one sixteenth. As they came around the first turn the favorite had a three-quarter length lead and Bobby was laying off his shoulder, like an executioner. He was loping loose and easy.

"We should have gone ten," I said. "We're in."

"Yeah, we've hooked the winner. We're in unless some big-ass closer comes out of the pack."

Bobby layed on the favorite's side halfway around the last turn and then made his move sooner than I expected. It was a trick jocks used sometimes. Bobby came around the favorite, dropped down on the rail and made his run right then instead of later. He had three and one half lengths at the top of the stretch. Then out of the pack came the horse we had to beat, the 4 horse, he read 9 to one but he was coming. But Bobby was gliding. He won on a hand ride by two and one half lengths and paid $10.40.

45

The next day at work we were questioned about our sudden departure. We admitted we had made the last race and also that we were going again that afternoon. Manny had his horse picked and I had mine. Some of the guys asked if we would take bets out for them. I said that I didn't know. At noon Manny and I went to a bar for lunch.

"Hank, we take their bets."

"Those guys don't have any money—all they have is the coffee and chewing gum money their wives give them and we don't have time to mess around with the two dollar windows."

"We don't bet their money, we keep their money."

"Suppose they win?"

"They won't win. They always pick the wrong horse. They have a way of always picking the wrong horse."

"Suppose they bet our horse?"

"Then we know we've got the wrong horse."

"Manny, what are you doing working in auto parts?"

"Resting. My ambition is handicapped by laziness."

We had another beer and went back to the warehouse.

46

We ran through the tunnel as they were putting them in the gate. We wanted Happy Needles. We were only getting 9 to 5 and I figured we wouldn't win two days running, so I just bet $5. Manny went $10 win. Happy Needles won by a neck, getting up on the outside in the last few strides. We had that win and we also had $32 in bad bets, courtesy of the boys at the warehouse.

Word got around and the boys at other warehouses, where I went to pick up parts, placed their bets with me. Manny was right, there was seldom a payoff. They didn't know how to bet; they bet too short or too long and the price kept hitting in the middle. I bought a good pair of shoes, a new belt and two expensive shirts. The owner of the warehouse didn't look so powerful any more. Manny and I took a little longer with our lunches and came back smoking good cigars. But it was still a rough ride every afternoon to make the last race. The crowd got to know us as we came running out of that tunnel, and every afternoon they were waiting. They cheered and waved racing forms, and the cheers seemed to grow louder as we went past them on the dead run to the betting windows.

47

The new life didn't sit well with Jan. She was used to her four fucks a day and also used to seeing me poor and humble. After a day at the warehouse, then the wild ride and finally sprinting across the parking lot and down through the tunnel, there wasn't much love left in me. When I came in each evening she'd be well into her wine.

"Mr. Horseplayer," she'd say as I walked in. She'd be all dressed up; high-heels, nylons, legs crossed high, swinging her foot. "Mr. Big Horseplayer. You know, when I first met you I liked the way you walked across a room. You didn't just *walk* across a room, you walked like you were going to walk through a wall, like you owned everything, like nothing mattered. Now you got a few bucks in your pocket and you're not the same any more. You act like a dental student or a plumber."

"Don't give me any shit about plumbers, Jan."

"You haven't made love to me in two weeks."

"Love takes many forms. Mine has been more subtle."

"You haven't fucked me for two weeks."

"Have patience. In six months we'll be vacationing in Rome, in Paris."

"Look at you! Pouring yourself that good whiskey and letting me sit here drinking this cheap rot-gut wine."

I relaxed in a chair and swirled my whiskey around with the ice cubes. I had on an expensive yellow shirt, very loud, and I had on new pants, green with white pinstripes.

"Mr. Big-Time Horseplayer!"

"I give you soul. I give you wisdom and light and music and a bit of laughter. Also, I am the world's greatest horseplayer."

"Horse shit!"

“No, horseplayer.” I drained my whiskey, got up, and made myself another.

48

The arguments were always the same. I understood it too well now—that great lovers were always men of leisure. I fucked better as a bum than as a puncher of timeclocks.

Jan began her counterattack, which was to argue with me, get me enraged and then run out into the streets, the bars. All she had to do was to sit on a barstool alone and the drinks, the offers would follow. I didn't think that was fair of her, naturally.

Most of the evenings fell into a pattern. She'd argue, grab her purse and be gone out the door. It was effective; we had lived and loved together for too many days. I had to feel it and feel it I did. But I always let her go as I sat helpless in my chair and drank my whiskey and tuned in the radio to a bit of classical music. I knew she was out there, and I knew there would be somebody else. Yet I had to let it happen, I had to let events take their own course.

This particular evening I sat there and something just broke in me, I could feel it breaking, something churned and rose in me and I got up and walked down the four flights of stairs and into the street. I walked down from Third and Union Streets to Sixth Street and then west along Sixth toward Alvarado. I walked along past the bars and I knew she was in one of them. I made a guess, walked in, and there was Jan sitting at the far end of the bar. She had a green and white silk scarf spread across her lap. She was sitting between a thin man with a large wart on his nose, and another man who was a little humped mound of a thing wearing bifocals and dressed in an old black suit.

Jan saw me coming. She lifted her head and even in the gloom of the bar she seemed to pale. I walked up behind her, standing near her stool. “I tried to make a woman out of you but you’ll never be anything but a god damned whore!” I back-handed her and knocked her off her stool. She fell flat on the floor and screamed. I picked up her drink and finished it. Then I slowly walked toward the exit. When I got there I turned. “Now, if there’s anybody here…who doesn’t *like* what I just did…just say so.”

There was no response. I guess they liked what I just did. I walked back out on Alvarado Street.

49

At the auto parts warehouse I did less and less. Mr. Mantz the owner would walk by and I would be crouched in a dark corner or in one of the aisles, very lazily putting incoming parts on the shelves.

"Chinaski, are you all right?"

"Yes."

"You're not sick?"

"No."

Then Mantz would walk off. The scene was repeated again and again with minor variations. Once he caught me making a sketch of the alley on the back of an invoice. My pockets were full of bookie money. The hangovers were not as bad, seeing as they were caused by the best whiskey money could buy.

I went on for two more weeks collecting paychecks. Then on a Wednesday morning Mantz stood in the center aisle near his office. He beckoned me forward with a motion of his hand. When I walked into his office, Mantz was back behind his desk. "Sit down, Chinaski." On the center of the desk was a check, face down. I slid the check face down along the glass top of the desk and without looking at it I slipped it in my wallet.

"You knew we were going to let you go?"

"Bosses are never hard to fathom."

"Chinaski, you haven't been pulling your weight for a month and you know it."

"A guy busts his damned ass and you don't appreciate it."

"You haven't been busting your ass, Chinaski."

I stared down at my shoes for some time. I didn't know what to say. Then I looked at him. "I've given you my *time*. It's all I've got to give—it's all any man has. And for a pitiful buck and a quarter an hour."

"Remember you begged for this job. You said your job was your second home."

"…my time so that you can live in your big house on the hill and have all the things that go with it. If anybody has lost anything on this deal, on this arrangement…I've been the loser. Do you understand?"

"All right, Chinaski."

"All right?"

"Yes. Just go."

I stood up. Mantz was dressed in a conservative brown suit, white shirt, dark red necktie. I tried to finish it up with a flair. "Mantz, I want my unemployment insurance. I don't want any trouble about that. You guys are always trying to cheat a working man out of his rights. So don't give me any trouble or I'll be back to see you."

"You'll get your insurance. Now get the hell out of here!"

I got the hell out of there.

50

I had my winnings and the bookie money and I just sat around and Jan liked that. After two weeks I was on unemployment and we relaxed and fucked and toured the bars and every week I'd go down to the California State Department of Employment and stand in line and get my nice little check. I only had to answer three questions: "Are you able to work?"

"Are you willing to work?"

"Will you accept employment?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" I always said.

I also had to turn in a list of three companies where I had applied for work during the previous week. I took the names and addresses out of the phonebook. I was always surprised when one of the unemployment insurance applicants would answer "no" to any of the three questions. Their checks were immediately withheld and they were walked into another room where specially trained counselors would help send them on their way to skid row.

But in spite of the unemployment checks and the backlog of racetrack money, my bankroll began to vanish. Both Jan and I were totally irresponsible when we were drinking heavily and our troubles kept arriving by the carload. I was always running down to Lincoln Heights Jail to bail Jan out. She'd come down in the elevator with one of the dyke matrons at her elbow, almost always with either a black eye or a cut mouth and very often with a dose of the crabs, compliments of some maniac she'd met in a bar somewhere. Then there was bail money and then court costs and fines, plus a request by the judge to go to A.A. meetings for six months. I too gathered my share of suspended sentences and heavy fines. Jan managed to extricate me from a variety of charges ranging from attempted rape to assault to indecent exposure to being a public nuisance. Disturbing the peace was one of my favorites too. Most of these charges did not involve actually serving any time in jail—so long as the fines were paid. But it was a huge continual expense. I remember one night our old car stalled just outside of MacArthur Park. I looked into the rearview mirror and said, "O.K., Jan, we're in luck. We are going to get a push. He's coming up right behind us. There are some kind souls in this ugly world." Then I looked again: "Hold your ASS, Jan, he's going to HIT us!" The son of a bitch had never slackened speed and he hit us straight on from the rear, so hard that the front seat collapsed and we were thrown flat. I got out and asked the guy if he had learned to drive in China. I also threatened his life. The police arrived and asked me if I cared to blow up their little balloon. "Don't do it," said Jan. But I refused to listen. Somehow I had the idea that since the guy had been in the wrong in hitting us, that I couldn't possibly be intoxicated. The last I remember was getting into the squad car with Jan standing by our stalled car with the collapsed front seat. Incidents such as this—and they came along one after the other—cost us a lot of money. Little by little our lives were falling apart.

51

Jan and I were at Los Alamitos. It was Saturday. Quarter Horse Racing was a novelty then. You were a winner or a loser in eighteen seconds. At that time the grandstands consisted of row after row of simple unvarnished planks. It was getting crowded when we got there and we spread newspaper on our seats to show that they were taken. Then we went down to the bar to study our racing forms…

Along about the fourth race we were $18 ahead not counting expenses. We placed our bets for the next race and went back to our seats. A small gray-haired old man was sitting in the center of our newspapers. "Sir, those are our seats." "These seats aren't reserved." "I know these seats aren't reserved. But it's a matter of common courtesy. You see…some people get here early, poor people, like you and me, who can't afford reserved seats, and they lay newspapers down to indicate that the seats are taken. It's like a code, you know, a code of courtesy…because if the poor aren't decent to one another nobody else is going to be." "These seats are NOT reserved." He spread himself just a bit more on the newspapers we had placed there. "Jan, sit down. I'll stand." Jan tried to sit down. "Just move it a bit," I said, "if you can't be a gentleman, don't be a hog." He moved a little. I had the 7 / 2 shot in the outside post. He got bumped at the start and had to make a late run. He came on in the last second to hang a photo on the 6 / 5 favorite. I waited, hoping. They put up the other horse's number. I'd bet $20 win. "Let's get a drink." There was a tote board inside. The odds were up on the next race as we walked to the bar. We ordered drinks from a man who looked like a polar bear. Jan looked into the mirror worrying about the sag in her cheeks and the pouches under her eyes. I never looked into mirrors. Jan lifted her drink. "That old man in our seats, he's got nerve. He's a spunky old dog." "I don't *like him." "He called your card." "What can a guy do with an old man?" "If he had been young you wouldn't have done anything either." I checked the tote. Three-Eyed Pete, reading 9 / 2, looked to be as good as the first or second choice. We finished our drinks and I went $5 win. When we got back to the stands, the old man was still sitting there. Jan sat down next to him. Their legs were pressed together. "What do you do for a living?" Jan asked him. "Real estate. I make sixty thousand a year—after taxes." "Then why don't you buy a reserved seat?" I asked. "That's my prerogative." Jan pressed her flank against him. She smiled her most beautiful smile. "You know," she said, "you've got the nicest blue eyes?" "Uh huh." "What's your name?" "Tony Endicott." "My name is Jan Meadows. My nickname is Misty." They put the horses into the gate and they broke out. Three-Eyed Pete got the first jump. He had a neck all the way. The last fifty yards the boy got out the whip, spanking ass. The second favorite made a tiny last lunge. They put up the photo again and I knew that I had lost. "You got a cigarette?" Jan asked Endicott. He handed it to Jan. She put it in her mouth, and with their flanks pressed together, he lit her cigarette. They looked into each other's eyes. I reached down and picked him up by the shirt collar. He sagged a bit but I kept holding him up by his shirt collar. "Sir, you are in my seat." "Yes. What are you going to do about it?" "Look down between your feet. See the opening under your seat? It's a thirty-five foot drop to the ground. I can push you through." "You don't have the guts." They put up the second favorite's number. I had lost. I got one of his legs down and through, dangling. He struggled and was surprisingly strong. He got his teeth into my left ear; he was biting my ear off. I got my fingers around his throat and choked him. There was one long white hair growing out of his throat. He gasped for air. His mouth opened and I pulled my ear out. I pushed his other leg through. A picture of Zsa Zsa Gabor flashed in my brain: she was cool, composed, immaculate, wearing pearls, her breasts bulging out of her low cut dress—then the lips that would never be mine said, no. The old man's fingers were clinging to a plank. He was hanging from the underside of the grandstand. I lifted one hand off. Then I lifted the* *other. He dropped through space. He fell slowly. He hit, bounced once, higher than one would expect, came down, hit again, took a second small bounce, then lay there motionless. There wasn't any blood. The people about us were very quiet. They bent over their racing forms. "Come on, let's go," I said. Jan and I walked out the side gate. People were still filing in. It was a mild afternoon, warm but not hot, gently warm. We walked outside past the track, past the clubhouse, and looking through the chain link fence at the east end we saw the horses come out of the stalls, making the slow circle to parade past the stands. We walked to the parking lot. We got into the car. We drove off. We drove back to the city: first past the oil wells and storage tanks, and then through open country past the small farms, quiet, neat, the stacked hay golden and ragged, the peeling white barns in the late afternoon sun, tiny farmhouses sitting in front on higher ground, perfect and warm. When we got to our apartment we found there was nothing to drink. I sent Jan out for something. When she came back we sat and drank, not saying much.*

52

When I awakened I was sweating. Jan's leg was thrown across my belly. I moved it. Then I got up and went to the bathroom. I had the running shits.

I thought, well, I'm alive and I'm sitting here and nobody's bothering me.

Then I got up and wiped, looked; what a mess, I thought, what a lovely powerful stink. Then I vomited and flushed it all away. I was very pale. A chill convulsed my body, shaking me; then there was a rush of warmth, my neck and ears burned, my face reddened. I felt dizzy and closed my eyes and leaned on both hands over the washbowl. It passed.

I went and sat on the edge of the bed and rolled a cigarette. I hadn't wiped myself very well. When I got up to look for a beer there was a wet brown stain. I went into the bathroom and wiped myself again. Then I sat on the bed with my beer and waited for Jan to awaken.

I had first learned that I was an idiot in the school yard. I was taunted and poked at and jeered, as were the other one or two idiots. My only advantage over the other one or two, who were beaten and chasen, was that I was sullen. When surrounded I was not terrified. They never attacked me but would finally turn on one of the others and beat them as I watched.

Jan moved, then awakened and looked at me.

"You're awake."

"Yes."

"That was some night."

"Night? Hell, it's the *day* that bothers me."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

Jan got up and went to the bathroom. I mixed her a port wine with icecubes and set it on the nightstand.

She came out, sat down and picked up the drink. “How do you feel?” she asked.

“Here I’ve killed a guy and you ask me how I feel.”

“What guy?”

“You remember. You weren’t that drunk. We were at Los Alamitos, I dropped the old guy through the grandstand. Your blue-eyed would-be lover with $60,000 a year.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Jan, you get on the booze, you black out. I do too, but you’re worse than I am.”

“We weren’t at Los Alamitos yesterday. You hate quarter horses.”

“I even remember the names of the horses I bet on.”

“We sat here all day and evening yesterday. You told me about your parents. Your parents hated you. Right?”

“Right.”

“So now you’re a little crazy. No love. Everybody needs love. It’s warped you.”

“People don’t need love. What they need is success in one form or another. It can be love but it needn’t be.”

“The Bible says, ‘Love thy neighbor.’”

“That could mean to leave him alone. I’m going out to get a paper.”

Jan yawned and lifted her breasts. They were an interesting brown-gold color—like tan mixed with dirt. “Get a little bottle of whiskey while you’re out.”

I dressed and walked down the hill toward Third Street. There was a drugstore at the bottom of the hill and a bar next to that. The sun was tired, and some of the cars went east and some of the cars went west, and it dawned on me that if everybody would only drive in the same direction everything would be solved.

I bought a newspaper. I stood there reading through it. There was no mention of a murdered horseplayer at Los Alamitos. Of course, it had happened in Orange County. Maybe Los Angeles County only reported their own murders.

I bought a half pint of Grand Dad at the liquor store and walked back up the hill. I folded the paper under my arm and opened the door to our place. I threw the half pint to Jan. "Ice, water and a good jolt for both of us. I am crazy."

Jan walked into the kitchen to mix the drinks and I sat down and opened the paper and turned to the race results at Los Alamitos. I read the result of the fifth race: Three-Eyed Pete had gone off at 9 / 2 and had been beaten by a nose by the second favorite.

When Jan brought the drink I drank it straight down. "You keep the car," I said, "and half the money I have left is yours."

"It's another woman, isn't it?"

"No."

I got all the money together and spread it out on the kitchen table. There was $312 and some change. I gave Jan the car key and $150.

"It's Mitzi, isn't it?"

"No."

"You don't love me anymore."

"Stop the shit, will you?"

"You're tired of fucking me, aren't you?"

"Just drive me down to Greyhound, will you?"

She went into the bathroom and started getting ready. She was sore. "You and I have lost it. It isn't like it was at the beginning."

I mixed myself another drink and didn't answer. Jan stepped out of the bathroom and looked at me. "Hank, stay with me."

"No."

She went back in and didn't say anything more. I got the suitcase out and began putting my few things in there. I took the clock. She wouldn't need it.

Jan left me outside the Greyhound bus depot. She hardly gave me time to lift my suitcase out and then she was gone. I walked in and purchased my ticket. Then I walked over and sat down on the hard-backed benches with the other passengers. We all sat there and looked at each other and didn't look at each other. We chewed gum, drank coffee, went into restrooms, urinated, slept. We sat on the hard benches and smoked cigarettes we didn't want to smoke. We looked at each other and didn't like what we saw. We looked at the things on the counters and display racks: potato chips, magazines, peanuts, best sellers, chewing gum, breath-chasers, licorice drops, toy whistles.

53

Miami was as far as I could go without leaving the country. I took Henry Miller with me and tried to read him all the way across. He was good when he was good, and vice versa. I had a pint. Then I had another pint, and another. The trip took four days and five nights. Outside of a leg-and-thigh rubbing episode with a young brunette girl whose parents would no longer support her in college, nothing much happened. She got off in the middle of the night in a particularly barren and cold part of the country, and vanished. I had always had insomnia and the only time I could really sleep on a bus was when I was totally drunk. I didn't dare try that. When we arrived I hadn't slept or shit for five days and I could barely walk. It was early evening. It felt good to be in the streets again.

ROOMS FOR RENT. I walked up and rang the doorbell. At such times one always places the old suitcase out of the view of the person who will open the door.

"I'm looking for a room. How much is it?"

"$6.50 a week."

"May I look at it?"

"Surely."

I walked in and followed her up the stairway. She was about forty-five but her behind swayed nicely. I have followed so many women up stairways like that, always thinking, if only some nice lady like this one would offer to take care of me and feed me warm tasty food and lay out clean stockings and shorts for me to wear, I would accept.

She opened the door and I looked in.

"All right," I said, "it looks all right."

"Are you employed?"

"Self-employed."

"May I ask what you do?"

"I'm a writer."

"Oh, have you written books?"

"Oh, I'm hardly ready for a novel. I just do articles, bits for magazines. Not very good really but I'm developing."

"All right. I'll give you your key and make out a receipt."

I followed her down the stairway. The ass didn't sway as nicely going down the stairway as going up. I looked at the back of her neck and imagined kissing her behind the ears.

"I'm Mrs. Adams," she said. "Your name?"

Henry Chinaski."

As she made out the receipt, I heard sounds like the sawing of wood coming from behind the door to our left—only the rasps were punctuated with gasps for breath. Each breath seemed to be the last yet each breath finally led painfully to another.

"My husband is ill," said Mrs. Adams as she handed me the receipt and my key, she smiled. Her eyes were a lovely hazel color and sparkled. I turned and walked back up the stairs.

When I got into my room I remembered I had left my suitcase downstairs. I went down to fetch it. As I walked past Mrs. Adams' door the gasping sounds were much louder. I took my suitcase upstairs, threw it on the bed, then walked downstairs again and out into the night. I found a main boulevard a little to the north, walked into a grocery store and bought a jar of peanut butter and a loaf of bread. I had a pocket knife and would be able to spread the peanut butter on the bread and have something to eat.

When I got back to the roominghouse I stood in the hall and listened to Mr. Adams, and I thought, that's Death. Then I went up to my room and opened the jar of peanut butter and while listening to the death sounds from below I dug my fingers in. I ate it right off my fingers. It was great. Then I opened the bread. It was green and moldy and had a sharp sour smell. How could they sell bread like that? What kind of a place was Florida? I threw the bread on the floor, got undressed, turned out the light, pulled up the covers and lay there in the dark, listening.

54

In the morning it was very quiet and I thought, that's nice, they've taken him to the hospital or the morgue. Now maybe I'll be able to shit. I got dressed and went down the hallway to the bathroom and sure enough I did. Then I walked down to my room, got into bed and slept some more.

I was awakened by a knock on the door. I sat up and called, "Come in!" before I thought. It was a lady dressed entirely in green. The blouse was low-cut, the skirt was very tight. She looked like a movie star. She simply stood there looking at me for some time. I was sitting up, in my shorts, holding the blanket in front of me. Chinaski the great lover. If I was any kind of man, I thought, I would rape her, set her panties on fire, force her to follow me all over the world, make tears come to her eyes with my love letters written on light red tissue paper. Her features were indefinite, not at all like her body; there was the general round shape of her face, the eyes seemed to be searching mine but her hair was a bit messy and uncombed. She was in her mid-thirties. Something, however, was exciting her. "Mrs. Adams' husband died last night," she said. "Ah," I said, wondering if she felt as good about the noise stopping as I did.

"And we're taking up a collection to buy flowers for Mr. Adams' funeral."

"I don't think that flowers are meant for the dead who don't need them," I said rather lamely.

She hesitated. "We thought it would be a nice thing to do and I wondered if you would like to contribute?"

"I'd like to but I just arrived in Miami last night and I'm broke."

"Broke?"

“Looking for a job. I’m up against it, as they say. I’ve spent my last dime on a jar of peanut butter and a loaf of bread. The bread was green, greener than your dress. I left it on the floor there and even the rats didn’t touch it.”

“Rats?”

“I don’t know about your room.”

“But when I talked to Mrs. Adams last evening I asked her about the new roomer—we’re all kind of like a family here—and she said that you were a writer, that you wrote for magazines like *Esquire* and *Atlantic Monthly*.”

“Hell, I can’t write. That’s just conversation. It makes the landlady feel better. What I need is a job, any kind of job.”

“Can’t you contribute twenty-five cents? Twenty-five cents wouldn’t hurt you.”

“Honey, I need the twenty-five cents more than Mr. Adams does.”

“Honor the dead, young man.”

“Why not honor the living? I’m lonely and desperate and you look very lovely in your green dress.”

She turned, walked out, walked down the hall, opened the door to her room, went in, closed the door, and I never saw her again.

55

The Florida State Department of Employment was a pleasant place. It wasn't as crowded as the Los Angeles office which was always full. It was my turn for a little good luck, not much, but a little. It was true that I didn't have much ambition, but there ought to be a place for people without ambition, I mean a better place than the one usually reserved. How in the hell could a man enjoy being awakened at 6:30 a.m. by an alarm clock, leap out of bed, dress, force-feed, shit, piss, brush teeth and hair, and fight traffic to get to a place where essentially you made lots of money for somebody else and were asked to be grateful for the opportunity to do so?

My name was called. The clerk had my card in front of him, the one I had filled out when entering. I had elaborated on my work experience in a creative way. Pros do that: you leave out the previous low-grade jobs and describe the better ones fully, also leaving out any mention of those blank stretches when you were alcoholic for six months and shacked with some woman just released from a madhouse or a bad marriage. Of course, since all my previous jobs were low-grade I left out the lower low-grade.

The clerk ran his fingers through his little card file. He pulled one out. "Ah, here's a job for you."

"Yes?"

He looked up. "Sanitation Worker."

"What?"

"Garbage man."

"I don't want it."

I shuddered at the thought of all that garbage, the morning hangovers, blacks laughing at me, the impossible weight of the cans, and me pukeing my guts into the orange rinds, coffee grounds, wet cigarette ashes, banana peels and the used tampax.

"What's the matter? Not good enough for you? It's 40 hours. And security. A lifetime of security."

"You take that job and I'll take yours."

Silence.

"I'm trained for this job."

"Are you? I spent two years in college. Is that a prerequisite to pick up garbage?"

"Well, what kind of job do you want?"

"Just keep flipping through your cards."

He flipped through his cards. Then he looked up. "We have nothing for you." He stamped the little book they'd given me and handed it back. "Contact us in seven days for further employment possibilities."

56

I found a job through the newspaper. I was hired by a clothing store but it wasn't in Miami it was in Miami Beach, and I had to take my hangover across the water each morning. The bus ran along a very narrow strip of cement that stood up out of the water with no guard-rail, no nothing; that's all there was to it. The bus driver leaned back and we roared along over this narrow cement strip surrounded by water and all the people in the bus, the twenty-five or forty or fifty-two people trusted him, but I never did. Sometimes it was a new driver, and I thought, how do they select these sons of bitches? There's deep water on both sides of us and with one error of judgement he'll kill us all. It was ridiculous. Suppose he had an argument with his wife that morning? Or cancer? Or visions of God? Bad teeth? Anything. He could do it. Dump us all. I knew that if I was driving that *I* would consider the possibility or desirability of drowning everybody. And sometimes, after just such considerations, possibility turns into reality. For each Joan of Arc there is a Hitler perched at the other end of the teeter-totter. The old story of good and evil. But none of the bus drivers ever dumped us. They were thinking instead of car payments, baseball scores, haircuts, vacations, enemas, family visits. There wasn't a real man in the whole shitload. I always got to work sick but safe. Which demonstrates why Schumann was more relative than Shostakovich…

I was hired as what they called the extra ball-bearing. The extra ball-bearing is the man who is simply turned loose without specific duties. He is supposed to *know* what to do after consulting some deep well of ancient instinct. Instinctively one is supposed to know what will best keep things running smoothly, best maintain the company, the Mother, and meet all her little needs which are irrational, continual and petty.

A good extra ball-bearing man is faceless, sexless, sacrificial; he is always waiting at the door when the first man with the key arrives. Soon he is hosing off the sidewalk, and he greets each person by name as they arrive, always with a bright smile and in a reassuring manner. Obeisant. That makes everybody feel a little better before the bloody grind begins. He sees that toilet paper is plentiful, especially in the ladies' crapper. That wastebaskets never overflow. That no grime coats the windows. That small repairs are promptly made on desks and office chairs. That doors open easily. That clocks are set. That carpeting remains tacked down. That overfed powerful women do not have to carry small packages.

I wasn't very good. My idea was to wander about doing nothing, always avoiding the boss, and avoiding the stoolies who might report to the boss. I wasn't all that clever. It was more instinct than anything else. I always started a job with the feeling that I'd soon quit or be fired, and this gave me a relaxed manner that was mistaken for intelligence or some secret power.

It was a completely self-sufficient, self-contained clothing store, factory and retail business combined. The showroom, the finished product and the salesman were all downstairs, and the factory was up above. The factory was a maze of catwalks and runways that even the rats couldn't crawl, long narrow lofts with men and women sitting and working under thirty watt bulbs, squinting, treading pedals, threading needles, never looking up or speaking, bent and quiet, doing it.

At one time one of my jobs in New York City had been to take bolts of fabric up to lofts like this. I would roll my hand truck in the busy street, pushing it through traffic, then into an alley behind some grimy building. There would be a dark elevator and I'd have to pull on ropes with stained round wooden spools attached. One rope meant up, another rope signalled down.

There was no light and as the elevator climbed slowly I'd watch in the dark for white numbers written on the bare walls—3, 7, 9, scrawled in chalk by some forgotten hand. I'd reach my floor, tug on another rope with my fingers and using all my strength slowly slide open the heavy old metal door, revealing row upon row of old Jewish ladies at their machines, laboring over piecework; the number one seamstress at the #1 machine, bent on maintaining her place; the number two girl at the #2 machine, ready to replace her should she falter. They never looked up or in any way acknowledged my presence as I entered.

In this clothing factory and store in Miami Beach, no deliveries were necessary. Everything was on hand. My first day I walked around the maze of lofts looking at people. Unlike New York, most of the workers were black. I walked up to a black man, quite small—almost tiny, who had a more pleasant face than most. He was doing some close work with a needle. I had a half pint in my pocket. "You got a rotten job there. Care for a drink?"

"Sure," he said. He took a good hit. Then handed the bottle back. He offered me a cigarette. "You new in town?" "Yeah." "Where you from?" "Los Angeles." "Movie star?" "Yes, on vacation." "You shouldn't be talking to the help." "I know." He fell silent. He looked like a little monkey, an old graceful monkey. For the boys downstairs, he *was* a monkey. I took a hit. I was feeling good. I watched them all working quietly under their thirty watt bulbs, their hands moving delicately and swiftly. "My name's Henry," I said. "Brad," he answered. "Listen, Brad, I get the deep deep blues watching you people work. Suppose I sing you guys and gals a little song?" "Don't." "You've got a rotten job there. Why do you do it?" "Shit, ain't no other way." "The Lord said there was." "You believe in the Lord?" "No." "What do you believe in?" "Nothing." "We're even."

I talked to some of the others. The men were uncommunicative, some of the women laughed at me. "I'm a spy," I laughed back. "I'm a company spy. I'm watching everybody."

I took another hit. Then I sang them my favorite song, "My Heart is a Hobo." They kept working. Nobody looked up. When I finished they were still working. It was quiet for some time. Then I heard a voice: "Look, white boy, don't come down on us."

I decided to go hose off the front sidewalk.

57

I don’t know how many weeks I worked there. I think six. At one point I was transferred to the receiving section, checking incoming shipments of trousers against the packing lists. These were orders being returned for credit from branch stores, usually out of the state. The packing lists were never wrong probably because the guy at the other end was too frightened for his job to be careless. Usually he is on the seventh of thirty-six payments for his new car, his wife is taking a ceramics class on Monday night, the interest on his mortgage is eating him alive, and each one of his five kids drinks a quart of milk a day.

You know, I’m not a clothes man. Clothes bore me. They are terrible things, cons, like vitamins, astrology, pizzas, skating rinks, pop music, heavyweight championship fights, etc. I was sitting there pretending to count the incoming pants when suddenly I came across something special. There was electricity in the fabric, it clung to my fingers and would not let go. Somebody had finally done something interesting. I examined the fabric. It looked as magical as it felt.

I got up, took the pants with me to the crapper. I went inside, locked the door. I had never stolen anything.

I took my own pants off, flushed the toilet. Then I put the magic pants on. I rolled the magic pantlegs up to just below my knees. Then I put my own pants back over them.

I flushed the toilet again.

Then I walked out. In my nervousness it seemed as if everyone was staring at me. I walked to the front of the store. It was about one and one half hours before quitting time. The boss was standing at a counter near the door. He stared at me. “I have something to take care of, Mr. Silverstein. Just dock my pay…”

58

I got to my room and took my old pants off. I rolled down the legs of my magic pants, put on a clean shirt, shined my shoes, and walked back out on the street in my new pants. They were a rich brown color, with fancy piping running vertically in the cloth.

The fabric glowed. I stood on the corner and lit a cigarette. A cab pulled up. The driver stuck his head out the window: “Taxi, sir?” “No thanks,” I said, tossing the match into the gutter and crossing the street.

I walked around for fifteen or twenty minutes. Three or four cabbies asked me if I wanted a ride. Then I bought a bottle of port and went back to my place. I took my clothes off, hung them up, went to bed, drank the wine and wrote a short story about a poor clerk who worked in a clothing factory in Miami. This poor clerk met a rich society girl on the beach one day durig his lunch hour. He deserved her money and she did everything in her power to show that she deserved him…

When I arrived for work in the morning, Mr. Silverstein was standing in front of the counter near the door. He had a check in his hand. He moved the hand toward me. I stepped forward and took the check. Then I walked back out on the street.

59

It took four days and five nights for the bus to reach Los Angeles. As usual I neither slept nor defecated during the trip. There was some minor excitement when a big blonde got on somewhere in Louisiana. That night she started selling it for $2, and every man and one woman on the bus took advantage of her generosity except me and the bus driver. Business was transacted at night in the back of the bus. Her name was Vera. She wore purple lipstick and laughed a lot. She approached me during a brief stop in a coffee and sandwich shop. She stood behind me and asked, “Whatsa matter, you too good for me?” I didn’t reply. “A fag,” I heard her mutter disgustedly as she sat down next to one of the regular guys…

In Los Angeles I toured the bars in our old neighborhood looking for Jan. I didn’t get anywhere until I found Whitey Jackson working behind the bar in the Pink Mule. He told me that Jan was working as a chambermaid in the Durham Hotel at Beverly and Vermont. I walked on over. I was looking for the manager’s office when she stepped out of a room. She looked good, like getting away from me for a while had helped her. Then she saw me. She just stood there, her eyes got very blue and round and she stood there. Then she said it, “Hank!” She rushed over and we were in each other’s arms. She kissed me wildly, I tried to kiss back. “Jesus,” she said, “I thought I’d never see you again!” “I’m back.” “Are you back for good?” “L.A.’s my town.” “Step back,” she said, “let me look at you.” I stepped back, grinning. “You’re thin. You’ve lost weight,” Jan said. “You’re looking good,” I said, “are you alone?” “Yes.” “There’s nobody?" "Nobody. You know I can't stand people." "I'm glad you're working." "Come to my room," she said.

I followed her. The room was very small but there was a good feel to it. You could look out the window and see the traffic, watch the signals working, see the paperboy on the corner. I liked the place. Jan threw herself on the bed. "Come on, lay down," she said. "I'm embarrassed." "I love you, you idiot," she said, "we've fucked 800 times, so relax." I took my shoes off and stretched out. She lifted a leg. "Still like my legs?" "Hell yes. Jan, have you finished your work?" "All but Mr. Clark's room. And Mr. Clark doesn't care. He leaves me tips." "Oh?" "I'm not doing anything. He just leaves tips." "Jan…" "Yes?" "The bus fare took all my money. I need a place to stay until I find a job." "I can hide you here." "Can you?" "Sure." "I love you, baby," I said. "Bastard," she said. We began to go at it. It felt good. It felt very very good.

Afterwards Jan got up and opened a bottle of wine. I opened my last pack of cigarettes and we sat in bed drinking and smoking. "You're all there," she said. "What do you mean?" "I mean, I never met a man like you." "Oh yeah?" "The others are only ten per cent there or twenty per cent, you're all there, *all* of you is very there, it's so different." "I don't know anything about it." "You're a hooker, you can hook women." That made me feel good. After we finished our cigarettes we made love again. Then Jan sent me out for another bottle. I came back. I had to.

60

I got hired immediately at a fluorescent light fixture company. It was up on Alameda Street, to the north, in a cluster of warehouses. I was the shipping clerk. It was quite easy, I took the orders out of a wire basket, filled them, packed the fixtures in cartons, and stacked the cartons on skids out on the loading dock, each carton labeled and numbered. I weighed the cartons, made out a bill of lading, and phoned the trucking companies to come pick the stuff up.

The first day I was there, in the afternoon, I heard a loud crash behind me near the assembly line. The old wooden racks that housed the finished parts were pulling away from the wall and crashing to the floor—metal and glass were hitting the cement floor, smashing, making a terrible racket. The assembly line workers ran to the other side of the building. Then it was silent. The boss, Mannie Feldman, stepped out of the office.

"*What the hell's going on here?*"

Nobody answered.

"*All right, shut down the assembly line! Everybody get a hammer and nails and get those fucking racks back up there!*"

Mr. Feldman walked back into his office. There was nothing for me to do but to get in and help them. None of us were carpenters. It took us all afternoon and half the next morning to nail the racks back up. As we finished Mr. Feldman walked out of his office.

"*So, you did it? All right, now listen to me—I want the 939's stacked on top, the 820's next on down, and the louvers and glass on the bottom shelves, get it? Now, does everybody get it?*"

There wasn't any answer. The 939's were the heaviest fixtures —they were really heavy mothers—and he wanted them on top. He was the boss. We went about it. We stacked them up there, all that weight, and we stacked the light stuff on the bottom racks. Then we went back to work. Those racks held up the rest of the day and through the night. In the morning we began to hear creaking sounds. The racks were starting to go. The assembly line workers began to edge away, they were grinning. About ten minutes before the morning coffee break everything came down again. Mr. Feldman came running out of his office:

"*What the hell's going on here?*"

61

Feldman was trying to collect his insurance and go bankrupt at the same time. The next morning a dignified looking man came down from the Bank of America. He told us not to build any more racks. “Just stack that shit on the floor,” was the way he put it. His name was Jennings, Curtis Jennings. Feldman owed the Bank of America a lot of money and the Bank of America wanted its money back before the business went under. Jennings took over management of the company. He walked around watching everybody. He went through Feldman’s books; he checked the locks and the windows and the security fence around the parking lot. He came up to me: “Don’t use Sieberling Truck Lines any more. They had four thefts while running one of your shipments through Arizona and New Mexico. Any particular reason you been using those boys?” “No, no reason.” The agent from Sieberling had been slipping me ten cents for each five hundred pounds of freight shipped out.

Within three days Jennings fired a man who worked in the front office and replaced three men on the assembly line with three young Mexican girls willing to work for half the pay. He fired the janitor and, along with doing the shipping, had me driving the company truck on local deliveries.

I got my first paycheck and moved out of Jan’s place and into an apartment of my own. When I came home one night, she had moved in with me. What the fuck, I told her, my land is your land. Shortly thereafter, we had our worst fight. She left and I got drunk for three days and three nights. When I sobered up I knew my job was gone. I never went back. I decided to clean up the apartment. I vacuumed the floors, scrubbed the window ledges, scoured the bathtub and sink, waxed the kitchen floor, killed all the spiders and roaches, emptied and washed the ashtrays, washed the dishes, scrubbed the kitchen sink, hung up clean towels and installed a new roll of toilet paper. I must be turning fag, I thought.

When Jan finally came home—a week later—she accused me of having had a woman here, because everything looked so clean. She acted very angry, but it was just a cover for her own guilt. I couldn't understand why I didn't get rid of her. She was compulsively unfaithful—she'd go off with anyone she met in a bar, and the lower and the dirtier he was the better she liked it. She was continually using our arguments to justify herself. I kept telling myself that all the women in the world weren't whores, just mine.

62

I walked into the Times Building. I had taken two years of Journalism at Los Angeles City College. I was stopped at the desk by a young lady. “You need a reporter here?” I asked. She handed me a printed sheet of paper. “Please fill this out.” It was the same at most newspapers in most cities. You were hired because you were famous or because you knew somebody. But I filled out the form. I made it look good. Then I left and walked down Spring Street.

It was a hot summer day. I began to sweat and itch. My crotch itched. I began to scratch. The itching became unbearable. I walked along scratching. I couldn’t be a reporter, I couldn’t be a writer, I couldn’t find a good woman, all I could do was walk along and scratch like a monkey. I hurried to my car which I had parked on Bunker Hill. I drove back to the apartment in a hurry. Jan wasn’t there. I went into the bathroom and stripped down.

I dug into my crotch with my fingers and I found something. I pulled it out. I dropped it into the palm of one hand and looked at it. It was white and had many tiny legs. It moved. It fascinated me. Then suddenly it leaped to the tile of the bathroom floor. I stared at it. With one quick leap it was gone. Probably back into my pubic hair! I felt sickened and angered. I stood there searching for it. I couldn’t find it. My stomach quivered. I gagged into the toilet and dressed again.

The corner drugstore wasn’t far. There was an old woman and an old man standing behind the counter. The woman came over. “No,” I said, “I want to talk to him.” “Oh,” she said.

The old man walked over. He was the pharmacist. He looked very clean. “I’m the victim of an inequity,” I told him.

"What?"

"Now look, do you have anything for…"

"For what?"

"Spiders, fleas…gnats, nits…"

"For what?"

"Do you have anything for crabs?"

The old man gave me a disgusted look. "Wait here," he said. He got something out from under the end of the counter. He came back and standing as far away from me as possible he handed me a little green and black cardboard box. I accepted it humbly. I handed him a $5 bill. I received my change at arm's length. The old woman had backed away into a corner of the drugstore. I felt like a holdup man.

"Wait," I said to the old man.

"What is it now?"

"I want some rubbers."

"How many?"

"Oh, a pack, a handful."

"Wet or dry?"

"What?"

"Wet or dry?"

"Give me the wet."

The old man gingerly handed me the rubbers. I handed him the money. Once again he handed me the change at arm's length. I walked out. As I walked down the street I took the rubbers out and looked at them. Then I threw them into the gutter.

Back at the apartment I stripped down and read the instructions. It said to apply the ointment to the invaded parts and wait thirty minutes. I turned the radio on, found a symphony, and squeezed the ointment out of the tube. It was green. I applied it thoroughly. Then I lay down on the bed and looked at the clock. Thirty minutes. Hell, I hated those crabs, I'd take an hour's worth. After forty-five minutes it started to burn. I'll kill every one of those fuckers, I thought. The burning increased. I rolled over on the bed and clenched my fists. I listened to Beethoven. I listened to Brahms, I hung on. I barely made the hour. I filled the tub and jumped in and washed the ointment off. When I got out of the tub I couldn't walk. The insides of my thighs were burned, my balls were burned, my belly was burned, I was a bright flaming red, I looked like an orangutang. I moved very slowly toward the bed. But I had killed the crabs, I had watched them go down the bathtub drain.

When Jan got home I was squirming on the bed. She stood looking at me. "What is it?" I rolled and cursed.

"You fucking whore! Look what you've *done* to me!"

I leaped up. I showed Jan the insides of my thighs, my belly, my balls. My balls dangled in red agony. My pecker was flaming.

"God! What is it?"

"Don't you know? Don't you know? *I* haven't fucked anybody else! I got it from YOU! You're a *carrier*, a disease ridden *slut!*"

"What?"

"The crabs, the crabs, you gave me the CRABS!"

"No, I don't have the crabs. Geraldine must have them."

"What?"

"I stayed with Geraldine, I must have gotten them sitting on Geraldine's toilet."

I threw myself down on the bed. "Oh, don't give me any of that shit! Go get us something to drink! There's not a fucking thing to drink around here!"

"I don't have any money."

"Take it out of my wallet. You know how to do that. And hurry! Something to drink! I'm dying!"

Jan left. I could hear her running down the stairs. The radio now played Mahler.

63

I awakened sick the next morning. It had been nearly impossible to sleep with the sheet over me. The burns seemed a little better, however. I got up and vomited and looked at my face in the mirror. They had me. I didn't have a chance.

I lay back on the bed. Jan was snoring. She didn't snore loudly but her snoring was persistent. It was something like I'd imagine a small hog would snore. Almost snorts. I looked at her wondering who I had been living with. She had a small pug nose and her blonde hair was turning "mousey" as she described it, as it went gray. Her face was sagging, she was getting jowls, she was ten years older than I. It was only when she was made up and was dressed in a tight skirt and wearing high heels that she looked good. Her ass was still shapely as were her legs and she had a seductive wiggle when she walked. Now as I looked at her she didn't look so wonderful. She was sleeping partly on one side and her pot belly was hanging out. She was a marvelous fuck, though. I had never had a better fuck. It was the way she took it. She really digested a fuck. Her hands would grip me and her pussy clutched just as hard. Most fucks are really nothing, they are mostly labor, like trying to climb a very steep, muddy hill. But not Jan.

The phone rang. It rang several times before I could struggle out of bed and answer it.

"Mr. Chinaski?"

"Yes?"

"This is the Times Building."

"Yes?"

"We've reviewed your application and would like to employ you."

"Reporter?"

"No, maintenance man and janitor."

"All right."

"Report to Superintendent Barnes at the south door at 9 p.m."

"O.K."

I hung up. The phone had awakened Jan.

"Who was that?"

"I've got a job and I can't even walk. I report tonight. I don't know what the hell."

I moved back toward the bed like a sore-assed turtle and fell on it.

"We'll think of something."

"I can't wear clothes. I don't know what to do."

We stretched out, staring at the ceiling. Jan got up and went to the bathroom. When she came back she said, "I've got it!"

"Yeah!"

"I'll wrap you in gauze."

"Think it will work?"

"Sure."

Jan got dressed and went to the store. She came back with gauze, adhesive tape, and a bottle of muscatel. She got some ice cubes, made us each a drink and found some scissors. "O.K., let's do you up."

"Now wait, I don't have to be down there until 9 p.m. It's a night job."

"But I want to practice. Come on."

"All right. Shit."

"Put one knee up."

"All right. Easy."

"There, around and around we go. The old merry-go-round."

"Did anybody ever tell you how funny you are?"

"No."

"That's understandable."

"There. A little adhesive tape. A little bit more adhesive tape. There. Now lift the other knee, lover."

"Never mind the romance."

“Around and around and around. Your big fat legs.”

“Your big fat ass.”

“Now, now, now, be nice, lover. Some more adhesive tape. And a little bit more. You’re good as new!”

“Like hell.”

“Now for the balls, your big red balls. You are just in time for Christmas!”

“Wait! What are you going to do to my balls?”

“I’m going to wrap them.”

“Isn’t that dangerous? It might affect my tap dancing.”

“It won’t hurt anything.”

“They’ll slip out.”

“I’ll put them into a nice cocoon.”

“Before you do, get me another drink.”

I sat up with the drink and she began to wrap me.

“Around and around and around. Poor little balls. Poor big balls. What have they done to you? Around and around and around we go. Now for a little adhesive. And some more. And some more.”

“Don’t tape my balls to my asshole.”

“Silly! I wouldn’t do that! I love you!”

“Yeah.”

“Now get up and walk around. Try walking around.”

I got up and walked around the room slowly. “Hey, this feels all right! I feel like a eunuch but I feel all right.”

“Maybe the eunuchs have it made.”

“I do believe they have.”

“How about a couple of soft boiled eggs?”

“Sure. I think I’m going to live.”

Jan put a pot of water on the stove, dropped in four eggs, and we waited.

64

I was there at 9 p.m. The Superintendent showed me where the timeclock was. I punched in. He handed me three or four rags and a large jar. “There’s a brass railing runs around this building. I want you to shine that brass railing.” I walked outside and looked for the brass railing. It was there. It ran around the building. It was a large building. I put some polish on the railing and then rubbed it off with one of the rags. It didn’t seem to do much good. People walked by and looked curiously at me. I’d had dull stupid jobs but this appeared to be the dullest and most stupid one of them all.

The idea, I decided, is not to think. But how do you stop thinking? Why was I chosen to polish this rail? Why couldn’t I be inside writing editorials about municipal corruption? Well, it could be worse. I could be in China working a rice paddy.

I polished about twenty-five feet of the railing, turned the corner, and saw a bar across the street. I took my rags and jar across the street and went into the bar. There was nobody in there, just the bartender. “How ya doing?” he asked.

“Great. Give me a bottle of Schlitz.”

He got one, opened it, took my money and rang it up.

“Where are the girls?” I asked.

“What girls?”

“You know. The girls.”

“This is a nice place.”

The door opened. It was Superintendent Barnes. “Can I buy you a beer?” I asked. He came over and stood beside me.

“Drink up, Chinaski, I’m giving you one last chance.”

I drank the beer down and followed him out. We crossed the street together. “Evidently,” he said, “you’re not much good at polishing brass. Follow me." We went into the Times Building and up in an elevator together. We got out on one of the upper floors. "Now," he said, pointing to a long cardboard box on a desk, "that box contains fluorescent light tubes, new ones. You are to replace all burnt out light tubes. Take them out of the fixtures and put in the new ones. There's your ladder."

"O.K.," I said.

The Superintendent walked off and I was alone again. I was in some kind of storage loft. That room had the highest ceiling I had ever seen. The ladder stood thirty-six feet high. I had always had a fear of heights. I took a new light tube and slowly mounted the ladder. I had to remind myself again, try not to think. I climbed upwards. The fluorescent tubes were about five feet long. They broke easily and were hard to handle. When I reached the top of the ladder I peered down. That was a big mistake. A dizzy spell swept over me. I was a coward. I was up against a big window on one of the upper floors. I imagined myself falling off the ladder and out through the window, down through space until I hit the street. I watched the tiny automobiles cross back and forth down in the street below me, their headlights bright in the night. Then, very slowly, I reached up and removed a burnt out fluorescent light. I replaced it with a new light. Then I climbed down, feeling more relief with each step downward. When I reached the ground I promised myself that I'd never get on that ladder again.

I walked around reading things left on desks and tables. I walked into a glassed-off office. There was a note to somebody: "All right, we'll try this new cartoonist but he'd better be good. He'd better start good and stay good, we're not carrying anybody."

A door opened and there was Superintendent Barnes. "Chinaski, what are you doing in there?"

I came out of the office. "I'm a former student of journalism and I'm curious, sir."

"Is that all you've done? Replaced one light fixture?"

"Sir, I can't do it. I have a fear of heights."

“All right, Chinaski. I’m going to clock you out for tonight. You don’t deserve another chance, but I want you to come back at 9 p.m. tomorrow night ready to do some work. And then we’ll see.”

“Yes, sir.”

I walked with him toward the elevator. “Tell me,” he asked, “how come you walk so funny?”

“I was frying some chicken in the pan and the grease exploded, it burned my legs.”

“I thought maybe you had war wounds.”

“No, the chicken did it.”

We went down in the elevator together.

65

The Superintendent's full name was Herman Barnes. Herman met me at the timeclock the next night and I punched in. "Follow me," he said. He took me into a very dimly lit room and introduced me to Jacob Christensen, who was to be my immediate supervisor. Barnes walked off.

Most of the people working at night in the Times Building were old, bent, defeated. They all walked around hunched over as if there was something wrong with their feet. We had all been assigned work overalls. "All right," said Jacob, "get your equipment." My equipment was a metal wagon, divided into two bins. In one half stood two mops, some rags and a large box of soap. The other half contained a variety of colored bottles and cans and boxes of supplies and more rags. It was evident that I was to be a janitor. Well, I had been a night janitor once before in San Francisco. You smuggled a bottle of wine in with you, worked like hell, and then when everybody else had gone, you sat looking out the windows, drinking wine and waiting for the dawn.

One of the old janitors came very close to me and screamed in my ear: "*These people are assholes, assholes! They have no intelligence! They don't know how to think! They're afraid of the mind! They're sick! They're cowards! They aren't thinking men like you and me!*"

His screams could be heard all over the room. He looked to be in his mid-sixties. The others were older, most of them looked seventy or more; about one third were women. They seemed used to the old fellow's antics. Nobody acted offended.

"*They make me sick!*" he screamed. "*No guts! look at them! Hunks of shit!*"

"All right, Hugh," said Jacob, "take your stuff upstairs and get to work."

"*I'll deck you, you bastard!*" he screamed at the supervisor, "*I'll deck you right in your tracks!*"

"Get going, Hugh."

Hugh angrily rolled his wagon out of there, almost running down one of the old women.

"He's that way," Jacob said to me, "but he's the best janitor we've got."

"It's all right," I said, "I like an action place."

As I rolled my wagon along, Jacob told me my duties. I was responsible for two floors. The most important part was the restrooms. Restrooms were always first. Clean the sinks, the toilets, empty the baskets, get the mirrors, replace the handtowels, fill the soap containers, use lots and lots of deodorant, and be sure there's plenty of ass-wipe and paper toilet seat covers. And don't forget the sanitary napkins in the ladies' john! After that, get the wastebaskets in the offices and dust the desks. Then you take this machine here and wax the halls, and after you finish that…

"Yes, sir," I said.

The women's restrooms, as usual, were the worst. Many of the women, apparently, simply left their used sanitary napkins on the floor in the stalls, and the sight of them, although familiar, was disturbing, especially with a hangover. The men's restrooms were somewhat cleaner but then men didn't use sanitary napkins. At least I was alone when I worked. I wasn't too good a mopper; often a wad of hair or a crushed cigarette butt would remain conspicuously in one of the corners. I'd leave it there. I was conscientious with the ass-wipe and the paper seat covers, however: I could understand that. Nothing is worse than to finish a good shit, then reach over and find the toilet paper container empty. Even the most horrible human being on earth deserves to wipe his ass. Sometimes I have reached over and there's no paper and then when you reach for a toilet seat cover they're suddenly out of those too. You stand up and look down and yours has just fallen into the water. After that you have few alternatives. The one I find most satisfying is to wipe your ass with your shorts, dump them in there too, flush, and clog the toilet.

I finished both the ladies' and the men's restrooms, emptied the wastebaskets and dusted a few desks. Then I went back to the ladies crapper. They had sofas and chairs in there and an alarm clock. I had four hours left. I set the alarm to ring thirty minutes before quitting time. I stretched out on one of the couches and went to sleep.

The alarm wakened me. I stretched, splashed cold water on my face, and went down to the storage room with my gear. Old Hugh approached me. "Welcome to the land of the assholes," he said to me, more calmly this time. I didn't answer. It was dark in there and we only had ten minutes until punch-out time. We took off our overalls, and in most cases our street clothes were as dismal and as sad as our working clothes. We spoke very little or in whispers. I didn't mind the quiet. It was restful.

Then Hugh got right up next to my ear: "*Look at the jerks!*" he screamed. "*just look at the god damned jerks!*"

I walked away from him and stood at the other side of the room.

"*Are you one of them?*" he screamed across at me, "*are you an asshole too?*"

"Yes, noble sir."

"*How'd you like a foot up your ass?*" he screamed back.

"There's only empty space between us," I said.

Ancient warrior that he was, Hugh decided to close that space and he came in a hurry, leaping stiffly over a row of buckets. I stepped aside and he went flying past. He turned, came back grabbed me by the throat with both hands. He had long powerful fingers for such an old man; I could feel each one of them, even his thumbs. Hugh smelled like a sinkful of unwashed dishes. I tried to pry him loose but his grip only got stronger. Shots of red, blue and yellow flashed inside my head. I had no choice. I brought a knee up as gently as possible. I missed the first try, got him on the second. His fingers and thumbs loosened. Hugh fell to the floor, grabbing his parts. Jacob came up. “What happened here?”

“He called me an asshole, sir, and then he attacked me.”

“Listen, Chinaski, this man is my best janitor. He’s the best janitor I’ve had in fifteen years. Go easy on him, will you?” I walked over, got my time card and punched out. Peppery old Hugh looked up at me from the floor as I walked out: “I’m going to kill you, mister,” he said.

Well, I thought, at least now he’s polite. But that really didn’t make me happy.

66

The next night I did about four hours work then went to the ladies' room, set the alarm and stretched out. I must have been asleep for about an hour when the door opened. It was Herman Barnes and Jacob Christensen. They looked at me; I raised my head and looked back, then put my head down on the cushion again. I heard them walk through into the crapper. When they came out I didn't look at them. I closed my eyes and pretended to be asleep.

The next day when I awakened about noon, I told Jan about it: "They caught me sleeping and didn't fire me. I guess I got them scared because of Hugh. It pays to be a tough son of a bitch. The world belongs to the strong."

"They're not going to let you get away with that."

"Balls. I've always told you I had it. I've got the touch. You might as well not have any god damned ears. You never listen to me."

"It's because you keep on saying the same thing over and over again."

"All right, let's have a drink and talk about it. You've been walking around with your ass up in the air since we got back together. Shit, I don't need you and you don't need me. Let's face up to the obvious."

Before the argument could start there was a knock on the door. "Hold it," I said and got into some pants. I opened the door and there was a Western Union delivery boy. I gave him a dime and opened the telegram: HENRY CHINASKI: YOUR EMPLOYMENT WITH THE TIMES CO. HAS BEEN TERMINATED.

HERMAN BARNES.

"What is it?" asked Jan.

"I've been canned."

"How about your check?"

"No mention."

"They owe you a check."

"I know. Let's go get it."

"O.K."

The car was gone. First it had lost its reverse gear, which was a challenge I overcame by continually planning ahead as we drove. Then the battery went dead which meant that the only way I could start it was coasting down a hill. I managed that for some weeks, then one night Jan and I got drunk and I forgot and parked it on a flat street outside a bar. It wouldn't start, of course, so I called an all-night garage and they came and towed it away. When I went to pick up the car a few days later they'd sunk $55 into repairing it and it still wouldn't start. I walked home and mailed them the pink slip.

So we had to walk to the Times Building. Jan knew I liked her in high heels so she put them on and we walked down there. It was a good twenty blocks one way. Jan sat down and rested on a bench outside and I walked up to the Payroll Department.

"I'm Henry Chinaski. I've been terminated and I'm here for my check."

"Henry Chinaski," said the girl, "wait a moment."

She looked through a sheaf of papers. "I'm sorry, Mr. Chinaski, but your check isn't ready yet."

"All right, I'll wait."

"We can't have your check ready until tomorrow, sir."

"But I've been terminated."

"I'm sorry. Tomorrow, sir."

I walked out. Jan got up from the bench. She looked hungry. "Let's hit the Grand Central Market for some stew meat and vegetables, then let's get a couple of bottles of good French wine."

"Jan, they said the check wasn't ready."

"But they have to give it to you. It's the law."

"I guess it is. I don't know. But they said the check would be ready tomorrow."

"Oh Christ, and I've walked all this way in high heels."

"You look good, baby."

"Yeah."

We started walking back. Halfway back Jan took off her heels and walked in her stocking feet. A couple of cars honked as we walked along. I gave each one of them the finger. When we got back there was enough money for tacos and beer. We got that, ate and drank, argued a bit, made love, and slept.

67

The next day about noon we started out again, Jan in her high heels. “I want you to make us some of that stew today,” she said. “No man makes stew like you can. It’s your greatest talent.”

“Thanks a hell of a lot,” I said.

It was still twenty blocks. Jan sat down on the bench again and took off her shoes while I went to Payroll. It was the same girl.

“I’m Henry Chinaski,” I said.

“Yes?”

“I was here yesterday.”

“Yes?”

“You said my check would be ready today.”

“Oh.”

The girl went through her papers. “I’m sorry, Mr. Chinaski, but your check isn’t here yet.”

“But you said it would be ready.”

“I’m sorry, sir, sometimes payroll checks take a little time to process.”

“I want my check.”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“You’re not sorry. You don’t know what sorrow is. I do. I want to see your boss’s boss. Now.”

The girl picked up a phone. “Mr. Handler? A Mr. Chinaski would like to see you about a termination payroll check.”

There was some more small talk. Finally the girl looked at me. “Room 309.”

I walked down to 309. The sign said “John Handler.” I opened the door. Handler was alone. An officer and a director of the largest and most powerful newspaper in the West. I sat down in the chair across from him.

"Well, John," I said, "they booted my ass, caught me asleep in the ladies' crapper. Me and my old lady have walked down here two days running only to be told you don't have the check. Now, you know, that's pure crap. All I want to do is get that check and get drunk. That may not sound noble but it's my choice. If I don't get that check I'm not sure what I'll do."

Then I gave him a look straight out of "Casablanca." "Got a smoke?"

John Handler gave me a smoke. He even lit it. Either they're going to throw a net over me or I'm going to get my check, I thought.

Handler picked up the phone. "Miss Simms. There's a check due a Mr. Henry Chinaski. I want it here within five minutes. Thank you." He hung up.

"Listen, John," I said, "I've had two years of journalism, L.A. City College. You couldn't use a reporter, could you?"

"Sorry, we're overstaffed now."

We chatted and after a few minutes a girl came in and handed John the check. He reached across the desk and handed it to me. A decent guy. I heard later that he died soon after that, but Jan and I got our beef stew and our vegetables and our French wine and we went on living.

68

I took the card they gave me at the State Department of Employment and walked over to the job interview. It was a few blocks east of Main Street and a little north of the skid row district. It was a company dealing with automobile brake parts. I showed them the card in the office and I filled out an application form. I lengthened my tenure at the jobs I had previously had, turning days into months and months into years. Most firms never bothered to check references. With those firms required to bond their employees, I didn't stand much chance. It would quickly appear that I had a police record. The brake supply house made no mention of a bond. Another problem after you had been on the job two or three weeks, most employers tried to get you to join their insurance plan, but by then I was usually gone.

The man glanced at my application and then turned humorously to the two women in the room: "This guy wants a job. Do you think he'll be able to stand us?"

Some jobs were amazingly easy to get. I remember one place I walked in, slouched down in a chair, and yawned. The guy behind the desk asked me: "Yes, what do you want?" "Oh hell," I answered, "I guess I need a job." "You're hired."

Some other jobs, however, were impossible for me to get. The Southern California Gas Company had ads in the help wanted section that promised high wages, early retirement, etc. I don't know how many times I went there and filled out their yellow application forms, how many times I sat on those hard chairs looking at large framed photos of pipes and gas storage tanks. I never came close to being hired and whenever I saw a gas man I would look at him very closely, trying to figure out what he had that I obviously didn't have.

The brake parts man took me up a narrow stairway. George Henley was his name. George showed me my workroom, very small, dark, just one lightbulb and one tiny window that looked out over an alley.

"Now," he said, "you see these cartons. You put the brake shoes into the cartons. Like this."

Mr. Henley showed me.

"We have three types of cartons, each printed differently. One carton is for our 'Super Durable Brake Shoe.' The other is for our 'Super Brake Shoe.' And the third is for our 'Standard Brake Shoe.' The brake shoes are stacked right here.

"But they all look alike to me. How can I tell them apart?"

"You don't. They're all the same. Just divide them into thirds. And when you finish packing all these shoes, come on downstairs and we'll find something else for you to do. O.K.?"

"O.K. When do I start?"

"You start now. And, absolutely no smoking. Not up here. If you have to smoke, you come on downstairs, O.K.?"

"O.K."

Mr. Henley closed the door. I heard him go down the stairs. I opened the little window and looked out at the world. Then I sat down, relaxed, and smoked a cigarette.

69

I quickly lost that job, just as I lost many others. But I didn't care—with one exception. It was the easiest job I ever had and I hated to see it go. It was during World War II. I was working for the Red Cross in San Francisco, driving a truck full of nurses and bottles and refrigerators around to various small towns. We collected blood for the war effort. I unloaded the trucks for the nurses when we arrived and then I had the rest of the day to walk around, sleep in the park, whatever. At the end of the day the nurses stuck the full bottles into the freezers and I squeezed blood clots out of the rubber tubes in the nearest crapper. I was usually sober but I pretended the blood clots were tiny fish or pretty little bugs which kept my lunch down.

The Red Cross job was a good one. I even had a date lined up with one of the nurses. But one morning I took the wrong bridge out of town and got lost in a skid row section somewhere with a truck full of nurses and needles and empty bottles. Those skid row guys were aching to rape the lot of us, and some of the nurses got nervous. It was back over the bridge for us and around some other way. I'd gotten my towns mixed up, and when we finally got to the church where the blood donors were waiting we were over two hours and fifteen minutes late. The front lawn was filled with angry donors and doctors and church officials. Across the Atlantic, Hitler was gaining with every step. I lost that job right then and there, unfortunately.

70

The Yellow Cab Company in L.A. is located on the south side of Third Street. Rows and rows of yellow cabs sit in the sun in the yards. It is near the American Cancer Society. I had visited the American Cancer Society earlier, as I had understood it to be free. I had lumps all over my body, dizzy spells, I was spitting blood, and I had gone there only to be given an appointment for three weeks later. Now like every American boy I had always been told: *catch cancer early*. Then you go down to catch it early and they make you wait three weeks for an appointment. That's the difference between what we're told and actuality.

After three weeks I went back and they told me they could give me certain tests free, but that I could pass these tests and wouldn't really be sure that I didn't have cancer. However, if I gave them $25 and passed that test, I could be *fairly* sure I didn't have cancer. To be *absolutely* sure, after I had taken the $25 test, I would have to take the $75 test, and if I passed that one too, I could relax. It would mean my trouble was alcoholism or nerves or the clap. They talk real good and clear, those kittens in the white coats at the American Cancer Society, and I said, in other words, $100. Umm hum, they said, and I walked out and went on a three day toot and all the lumps vanished along with the dizzy spells and the blood spitting.

When I went to the Yellow Cab Company I passed the Cancer Building and I remembered that there were worse things than looking for a job you didn't want. I went in and it seemed easy enough, the same old forms, questions, etc. The only new thing was fingerprints but I knew how to be fingerprinted and I relaxed the hand and fingers and pressed them in the ink and the girl complimented me on my expertise. Mr. Yellow said to come back the next day to training class, and Jan and I celebrated that night.

71

Janeway Smithson was a little, insane, grey-haired bantam rooster of a man. He loaded five or six of us in one cab, and we rolled down to the bed of the L.A. River. Now in those days the L.A. River was a fake—there was no water, just a wide, flat, dry cement runway. The bums lived down there by the hundreds in little cement alcoves under the bridges and overpasses. Some of them even had potted plants in front of their places. All they needed to live like kings was canned heat (Sterno) and what they picked out of the nearby garbage dump. They were tan and relaxed and most of them looked a hell of a lot healthier than the average Los Angeles business man. Those guys down there had no problems with women, income tax, landlords, burial expenses, dentists, time payments, car repairs, or with climbing into a voting booth and pulling the curtain closed.

Janeway Smithson had been on the job for twenty-five years and was dumb enough to be proud of it. He carried a pistol in his right hip pocket and bragged that he had stopped a yellow cab in less time and fewer feet while taking the Brake Test than any other man in the history of the Yellow Cab Company. Looking at Janeway Smithson it occurred to me that this was either a lie or had been half-assed luck, and that Smithson, like any other twenty-five-year-man, was totally insane.

"O.K.," he said, "Bowers, you're first. Get this cocksucker up to forty-five miles per hour and hold her there. I've got this gun in my right hand and a stopwatch in my left hand. When I fire, you hit the brakes. If you ain't got the reflexes to stop her quick enough, you'll be selling green bananas at noon at Seventh and Broadway…No, you fucker! Don't watch my trigger finger! Look straight ahead! I'm going to sing you a little song. I'm going to lull you to sleep. You'll never guess when this son of a bitch is going to go off!"

It went off right then. Bowers hit the brakes. We lurched and skidded and spun. Clouds of dust billowed up from under the wheels as we whizzed between huge concrete pillars. Finally the cab screeched to a stop and rocked back and forth. Somebody in the back seat got a nosebleed.

"Did I make it?" Bowers asked.

"I ain't gonna tell you," said Smithson, making a notation in his little black book. "O.K., De Esprito, you're next."

De Esprito took the wheel and we went through more of the same. The drivers kept changing as we ran up and down the L.A. riverbed, burning brakes and rubber and shooting off the pistol. I was last to try it. "Chinaski," said Smithson.

I took the wheel and ran the cab up to fifty m.p.h.

"You set the record, eh Pops? I'm going to shoot your ass right off the map!"

"What?"

"Blow out the earwax! I'm going to take you, Pops! I once shook hands with Max Baer! I was once a gardener for Tex Ritter! Kiss your ass goodbye!"

"You're *ridin'* the god damned brake! Take your foot off the god damned brake!"

"Sing me a song, Pops! Sing me your little song! I've got forty love letters from Mae West in my dufflebag!"

"*You can't beat me!*"

I didn't wait for the gun. I hit the brakes. I guessed right. The gun and my foot hit at the same time. I beat his world record by fifteen feet and nine-tenths of a second. That's what he said at first. Then he changed his tune and said that I had cheated. I said, "O.K., write me up for whatever you want, but just get us out of the L.A. River. It's not going to rain so we won't be able to catch any fish."

72

There were forty or fifty of us in the Training Class. We all sat at little desks, rows of them bolted to the floor. Each desk had a flat area like an arm rest to the right hand side. It was just like the old days in a biology or chemistry class.

Smithson called roll.

“Peters!”

“Yep.”

“Calloway.”

“Uh huh.”

“McBride…”

(Silence).

“McBride?”

“Oh, ya.”

The roll call continued. I thought it was very nice that there were so many job openings, yet it worried me too—we’d probably be pitted against one another in some way. Survival of the fittest. There were always men looking for jobs in America. There were always all these usable bodies. And I wanted to be a writer. Almost everybody was a writer. Not everybody thought they could be a dentist or an automobile mechanic but everybody knew they could be a writer. Of those fifty guys in the room, probably fifteen of them thought they were writers. Almost everybody used words and could write them down, i.e., almost everybody could be a writer. But most men, fortunately, aren’t writers, or even cab drivers, and some men—many men—unfortunately aren’t anything.

The roll call was over. Smithson looked around the room. “We are gathered here,” he began, then stopped. He looked at a black man in the first row. “Spencer?”

"Yes."

"You took the wire out of your cap, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Now you see, you'll be sitting in your cab with your cap down over your ears like Doug McArthur and some old woman with a shopping bag will walk up and want to take a cab and you'll be sitting there like that with your arm hanging out the window and she'll think you're a cowboy. She'll think you're a cowboy and she won't ride with you. She'll take a bus. That stuff is all right in the army, but this is *Yellow Cab*."

Spencer reached down on the floor, got the wire and put it back in his cap. He needed the job.

"Now most guys think they know how to drive. But the fact is very few people know how to drive, they just steer. Everytime I drive down the street I marvel at the fact that there isn't an accident every few seconds. Every day I see two or three people simply run through red lights as if they didn't exist. I'm no preacher but I can tell you this—the lives that people lead are driving them crazy and their insanity comes out in the way they drive. I'm not here to tell you how to live. You'll have to see your rabbi or your priest or your local whore. I'm here to teach you how to drive. I'm trying to keep our insurance rates down, and to fix it so you can get back to your room alive at night."

"God damn," said the kid next to me, "old Smithson's something, ain't he?"

"Every man is a poet," I said.

"Now," said Smithson, "and, god damn you, McBride, wake up and listen to me…now, when is the only time a man can lose control of his cab and won't be able to help it?"

"When I get a hard-on?" said some cracker.

"Mendoza, if you can't drive with a hard-on we can't use you. Some of our best men drive with hard-ons all day long and all night too."

The boys laughed.

"Come on, when is the only time a man can lose control of his cab and won't be able to help it?" Nobody answered. I raised my hand.

"Yes, Chinaski?"

"A man might lose control of his cab when he sneezed."

"That's correct."

I felt like a star pupil again. It was like the old L.A. City College days—bad grades, but good with the mouth.

"All right, when you sneeze, what do you do?"

As I raised my hand again the door opened and a man entered the room. He walked down the aisle and stood before me. "Are you Henry Chinaski?"

"Yes."

He snatched my cabbie's cap from my head, almost angrily. Everybody looked at me. Smithson's face was expressionless and impartial.

"Follow me," said the man.

I followed him out of the study hall and into his office.

"Sit down."

I sat down.

"We ran a check on you, Chinaski."

"Yes?"

"You have eighteen common drunks and one drunk driving."

"I thought if I put it down I wouldn't get hired."

"You lied to us."

"I've stopped drinking."

"It doesn't matter. Once you've falsified your application, you're disqualified."

I got up and walked out. I walked down the sidewalk past the Cancer Building. I walked back to our apartment. Jan was in bed. She was wearing a torn pink slip. One shoulder strap was held together by a safety pin. She was already drunk. "How'd you make out, daddy?"

"They don't want me."

"How come?"

"They don't want homosexuals."

"Oh, well. There's wine in the fridge. Get yourself a glass and come on to bed."

That I did.

73

A couple of days later I found an ad in the paper for a shipping clerk in an art supply store. The store was very close to where we lived but I overslept and it wasn't until 3 p.m. that I got down there. The manager was talking to an applicant when I arrived. I didn't know how many others he had interviewed. A girl gave me a form to fill out. The guy seemed to be making a good impression on the manager. They were both laughing. I filled out the form and waited. Finally the manager called me over.

"I want to tell you something. I already accepted another job this morning," I told him. "Then I happened to see your ad. I live right around the corner. I thought it might be nicer to work so close to home. Besides, I paint as a hobby. I thought I might get a discount on some of the art supplies I need."

"We give 15% off to employees. What is the name of this other place that hired you?"

"Jones-Hammer Arc Light Company. I'm to supervise their shipping department. They're on lower Alameda Street just below the slaughterhouse. I'm supposed to report at 8 a.m."

"Well, we still want to interview some more applicants."

"It's all right. I didn't expect to take this job. I just dropped in because it was nearby. You have my phone number on the application. But once I go to work at Jones-Hammer, it wouldn't be fair for me to leave them."

"You're married?"

"Yes. With one child. A boy. Tommy, age 3."

"All right. We'll let you know."

The phone rang at 6:30 p.m. that evening. "Mr. Chinaski?"

“Yes?”
“Do you still want the job?”
“Where?”
“At the Graphic Cherub Art Supply.”
“Well, yes.”
“Then report at 8:30 a.m.”

74

Business didn't seem to be too good. Outgoing orders were few and small. The manger, Bud, walked back to where I was leaning against the shipping table smoking a cigar. "When things are slow you can go get yourself a cup of coffee at the cafe around the corner. But be sure you're back here when the trucks come by for the pickups."

"Sure."

"And keep your squeegie rack filled. Keep a good supply of squeegies."

"All right."

"Also keep your eyes peeled and see that nobody comes in from the back and steals our stock. We got a lotta winos roaming these alleys."

"O.K."

"You got plenty of FRAGILE labels?"

"Yes."

"Don't be afraid to use plenty of FRAGILE labels. If you run out, let me know. Pack the stuff good, especially the paints in glass."

"I'll take care of everything."

"O.K. And when things get slow you walk down the alley and get yourself a cup of coffee. It's Montie's Cafe. They got a waitress there with big tits, you ought to see them. She wears low-cut blouses and bends over all the time. And the pie is fresh."

"O.K."

75

Mary Lou was one of the girls in the front office. Mary Lou had style. She drove a three year old Cadillac and lived with her mother. She entertained members of the L.A. Philharmonic, movie directors, cameramen, lawyers, real estate agents, chiropractors, holy men, ex-aviators, ballet dancers and other entertainment figures such as wrestlers and defensive left ends. But she had never married and she had never gotten out of the front office of Graphic Cherub Art Supply, except now and then for a quickie fuck with Bud in the ladies' room, giggling, with the door bolted after she thought the rest of us had gone home. Also, she was religious and loved to play the horses, but preferably from a reserved seat and preferably at Santa Anita. She looked down on Hollywood Park. She was desperate and she was choosey at the same time and, in a way, beautiful, but she didn't have quite enough going for her to become what she imagined herself to be.

One of her jobs was to bring a copy of the orders back to me after she had typed them. The clerks picked up another copy of the same orders out of the basket to fill when they weren't waiting on customers, and I'd match them up before I packed the stuff. The first time she came back with some orders she wore a tight black skirt, high heels, a white blouse, and a gold and black scarf around her neck. She had a cute turned-up nose, a marvelous behind and fine breasts. She was tall. Class.

"Bud tells me you paint," she said.

"A bit."

"Oh, I think that's marvelous. We have such interesting people working here."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we have a janitor, an old man, Maurice, he's from France. He comes once a week and cleans the store. He paints too. He buys all his paints and brushes and canvas from us. But he's strange. He never speaks, just nods and points. He just points to things he wants to buy."

"Uh huh."

"He's strange."

"Uh huh."

"Last week I went into the ladies' room, and he was there, mopping up in the dark. He'd been in there an hour."

"Uh."

"You don't talk either."

"Oh yes. I'm all right."

Mary Lou turned and walked away. I watched the buttocks work on that tall body. Magic. Some women were magic.

I had packed a few orders when this old guy came walking down the aisle. He had a grubby grey mustache that drooped around his mouth. He was small and bent. He was dressed in black, had a red scarf tied around his throat, and he word a blue beret. Out from under the blue beret came much long grey hair, uncombed.

Maurice's eyes were the most distinctive thing about him; they were a vivid green and seemed to look out from deep within his head. He had bushy eyebrows. He was smoking a long thin cigar. "Hi, kid," he said. Maurice didn't have much of a French accent. He sat on the end of the packing table and crossed his legs.

"I thought you didn't talk?"

"Oh, that. Balls. I wouldn't piss on a fly for them. Why bother?"

"How come you clean the crapper in the dark?"

"That's Mary Lou. I look at her. Then I go in there and come all over the floor. I mop it up. She knows."

"You paint?"

"Yes, I'm working on a canvas in my room now. As big as this wall. Not a mural. A canvas. I am painting a man's life—from his birth through the vagina, through all the years of his existence, then finally into the grave. I look at people in the park. I use them. That Mary Lou, she'd make one good fuck, what?"

"Maybe. It could be a mirage."

"I lived in France. I met Picasso."

"Did you really?"

"Shit, I did. He's O.K."

"How'd you meet him?"

"I knocked on his door."

"Was he pissed?"

"No. No, he wasn't pissed."

"Some people don't like him."

"Some people don't like anybody who is famous."

"And some people don't like anybody who isn't."

"People don't count. I wouldn't piss on a fly for them."

"What'd Picasso say?"

"Well, I asked him. I said, 'Master, what can I do to make my work better?'"

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"What'd he say?"

"He said, 'I can't tell you anything about your work. You must do it all by yourself.'"

"Ha."

"Yes."

"Pretty good."

"Yes. Got a match?"

I gave him some. His cigar had gone out.

"My brother is rich," said Maurice. "He has disowned me. He doesn't like my drinking. He doesn't like my painting."

"But your brother never met Picasso."

Maurice stood up and smiled.

"No, he never met Picasso."

Maurice walked back down the aisle toward the front of the store, cigar smoke curling back over his shoulder. He had kept my book of matches.

76

Bud came back pushing three one gallon cans of paint on the order wagon. He put them on the packing table. They were labeled *crimson*. He handed me three labels. The labels said *vermillion*.

“We’re out of vermillion,” he said. “Soak off these labels and paste on the *vermillion* labels.”

“There’s quite a difference between crimson and vermillion,” I said.

“Just do it.”

Bud left me some rags and a razor blade. I soaked the rags in water and wrapped them around the cans. Then I scraped off the old labels and glued on the new ones.

He came back a few minutes later. He had a can of *ultramarine* and a label for *cobalt blue*. Well, he was getting closer…

77

Paul was one of the clerks. He was fat, about 28. His eyes were very large, bulging. He was on pills. He showed me a handful. They were all different sizes and colors.

“Want some?”

“No.”

“Go ahead. Take one.”

“All right.”

I took a yellow.

“I take ’em all,” he said. “Damn things. Some want to take me up, some want to take me down. I let them fight over me.”

“That’s supposed to be rough on you.”

“I know. Say, why don’t you come to my place after work?”

“I’ve got a woman.”

“We’ve all got women. I’ve got something better.”

“What?”

“My girlfriend bought me this reducing machine for my birthday. We fuck on it. It moves up and down, we don’t have to do any work. The machine does all the work.”

“It sounds good.”

“You and I can use that machine. It makes a lot of noise but as long as we don’t use it after 10 p.m. it’s O.K.”

“Who gets on top?”

“What difference does it make? I can take it or give it. Top or bottom, it doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“Hell no. We’ll flip for it.”

“Let me think it over.”

“All right. Want another pill?”

“Yeah. Give me another yellow.”

"I'll check with you at closing time."
"Sure."

Paul was there at closing.

"Well?"

"I can't do it, Paul. I'm straight."

"It's a great machine. Once you get on that machine you'll forget everything."

"I can't do it."

"Well, come on over and look at my pills anyhow."

"All right. I can do that."

I locked the back door. Then we walked out the front together. Mary Lou was sitting in the office smoking a cigarette and talking to Bud.

"Good night, men," said Bud with a big grin on his face…

Paul's place was a block off to the south. He had a lower front apartment with the windows facing Seventh Street.

"There's the machine," he said. He turned it on.

"Look at it, look at it. It sounds like a washing machine. The woman upstairs, she sees me in the hall and she says, 'Paul you must really be a clean guy. I hear you washing your clothes three or four times a week.'"

"Turn it off," I said.

"Look at my pills. I've got thousands of pills, *thousands*. I don't even know what some of them are."

Paul had all the bottles on the coffee table. There were eleven or twelve bottles, all different sizes and shapes and filled with colored pills. They were beautiful. As I watched he opened a bottle and took three or four pills out of it and swallowed them. Then he opened another bottle and took a couple of pills. Then he opened a third bottle.

"Come on, what the hell," he said. "let's get on the machine."

"I'll take a rain check. I got to go."

"All right," he said, "if you won't fuck me, I'll fuck myself!"

I closed the door behind me and walked out on the street. I heard him turn on the machine.

78

Mr. Manders walked back to where I was working and stood and looked at me. I was packing a large order of paints and he stood there watching me. Manders had been the original owner of the store but his wife had run off with a black man and he had started drinking. He drank his way out of the ownership. Now he was just a salesman and another man owned his store.

"You putting FRAGILE labels on these cartons?"

"Yes."

"Do you pack them well? Plenty of newspaper and straw?"

"I think I'm doing it right."

"Do you have enough FRAGILE labels?"

"Yes, there's a whole boxfull under the bench here."

"Are you sure you know what you're doing? You don't look like a shipping clerk."

"What does a shipping clerk look like?"

"They wear aprons. You don't wear an apron."

"Oh."

"Smith-Barnsley called to say that they had received a broken pint jar of rubber cement in a shipment."

I didn't answer.

"You let me know if you run out of FRAGILE labels."

"Sure."

Manders walked off down the aisle. Then he stopped and turned and watched me. I ripped some tape off the dispenser and with an extra flourish I wrapped it around the carton. Manders turned and walked away.

Bud came running back. "How many six-foot squeegies you got in stock?"

“None.”

“This guy wants five six-foot squeegies now. He’s waiting for them. Make them up.”

Bud ran off. A squeegie is a piece of board with a rubber edge. It’s used in silk-screening. I went to the attic, got the lumber down, measured off five six-foot sections, and sawed the boards. Then I began drilling holes into the wood along one edge. You bolted the rubber into place after drilling the holes. Then you had to sand the rubber down until it was level, a perfectly straight edge. If the rubber edge wasn’t perfectly straight, the silk-screen process wouldn’t work. And the rubber had a way of curling and warping and resisting.

Bud was back in three minutes. “You got those squeegies ready yet?”

“No.”

He ran back to the front. I drilled, turned screws, sanded. In five more minutes he was back. “You got those squeegies ready yet?”

“No.”

He ran off.

I had one six-foot squeegie finished and was halfway through another when he came back again.

“Never mind. He left.”

Bud walked back up toward the front…

79

The store was going broke. Each day the orders were smaller and smaller. There was less and less to do. They fired Picasso's buddy and had me mop the crappers, empty the baskets, hang the toilet paper. Each morning I swept and watered the sidewalk in front of the store. Once a week I washed the windows.

One day I decided to clean up my own quarters. One of the things I did was to clean out the carton area where I kept all the empty cartons I used for shipping. I got them all out of there and swept up the trash. As I was cleaning up I noticed a small oblong grey box at the bottom of the bin. I picked it up and opened it. It contained twenty-four large-sized camel hair brushes. They were fat and beautiful and sold for $10 each. I didn't know what to do. I looked at them for some time, then closed the lid, walked out the back and put them in a trashcan in the alley. Then I put all the empty cartons back in the bin.

That night I left as late as possible. I walked to the nearby cafe and had a coffee and apple pie. Then I came out, walked down the block, and turned up the alley. I walked up the alley and was a quarter of the way when I saw Bud and Mary Lou enter the alley from the other end. There was nothing to do but to keep walking. It was final. We got closer and closer. Finally as I passed them I said, "Hi." They said, "Hi." I kept walking. I walked out the other end of the alley and across the street and into a bar. I sat down. I sat there and had a beer and then had another. A woman down the bar asked me if I had a match. I got up and lighted her cigarette; as I did that, she farted. I asked her if she lived in the neighborhood. She said she was from Montana. I remembered an unhappy night I'd had in Cheyenne, Wyoming, which is near Montana. Finally I left and walked back to the alley.

I went up to the trashcan and reached in. It was still there: the oblong grey box. It didn't feel empty. I slipped it through the neck of my shirt and it dropped down, slipped down, slid down against my gut and lay there. I walked back to where I lived.

80

The next thing that happened was that they hired a Japanese girl. I had always had a very strange idea, for a long time, that after all the trouble and pain was over, that a Japanese girl would come along one day and we would live happily ever after. Not so much happily, as *easily* and with deep understanding and mutual concern. Japanese women had a beautiful bone structure. The shape of the skull, and the tightening of the skin with age, was a lovely thing; the skin of the drum drawn taut. With American women the face got looser and looser and finally fell apart. Even their bottoms fell apart and became indecent. The strength of the two cultures was very different too: Japanese women instinctively understood yesterday and today and tomorrow. Call it wisdom. And they had staying power. American women only knew today and tended to come to pieces when just one day went wrong.

So I was very taken with the new girl. Also I was still drinking heavily with Jan which befuddled the brain, gave it a strange airy feeling, made it take strange twists and turns, gave it courage. So the first day she came back with the orders I said, "Hey, let's touch. I want to kiss you."

"What?"

"You heard me."

She walked away. As she did I noticed she had a slight limp. It figured: the pain and the weight of centuries…

I kept after her like a horny redneck drunk on beer in a Greyhound bus passing through Texas. She was intrigued—she understood my craziness. I was enchanting her without realizing it.

One day a customer telephoned to ask if we had gallon cans of white glue in stock and she came back to check some cartons stacked in one corner. I saw her and asked if I might help. She said, “I’m looking for a carton of glue stamped 2-G.”

“2-G,” I said, “huh?”

I put my arm around her waist.

“We’re going to make it. You are the wisdom of centuries and I am me. We are meant for each other.”

She began to giggle like an American woman. “Japanese girls don’t do that. What the hell’s the matter with you?”

She rested against me. I noticed a row of paint cartons pushed against the wall. I led her over and gently sat her on the row of cartons. I pushed her down. I climbed on top of her and began kissing her, pulling up her dress. Then Danny, one of the clerks walked in. Danny was a virgin. Danny went to painting class at night and fell asleep during the day. He couldn’t separate art from cigarette butts. “What the hell’s going on here?” he asked, and then he walked swiftly away toward the front office.

Bud called me into the front office the next day. “You know, we had to let her go too.”

“It wasn’t her fault.”

“She was with you back there.”

“I instigated.”

“She submitted, according to Danny.”

“What does Danny know about submission? The only thing he has ever submitted to is his hand.”

“He saw you.”

“Saw what? I didn’t even have her panties off.”

“This is a business house.”

“There’s Mary Lou.”

“I hired you because I thought you were a dependable shipping clerk.”

“Thanks. And I end up getting fired for trying to fuck a slant-eyed squaw with a gimp in her left leg on top of forty gallons of auto paint—which, by the way, you’ve been selling to the L.A.

City College Art Department as the real thing. I ought to turn you over to the Better Business Bureau."

"Here's your check. You're finished."

"All right. See you at Santa Anita."

"Sure," he said.

There was an extra day's pay on the check. We shook hands and I walked out.

81

The next job didn't last long either. It was little more than a stopover. It was a small company specializing in Christmas items: lights, wreaths, Santa Clauses, paper trees, all that. When I was hired they told me that they'd have to let me go the day before Thanksgiving; that there wasn't any business after Thanksgiving. There were a half-dozen of us hired under the same conditions. They called us "warehousemen" and mainly we loaded and unloaded trucks. Also, a warehouseman is a guy who stands around a lot smoking cigarettes, in a dream-like state. But we didn't last until Thanksgiving, the half-dozen of us. It was my idea that we go to a bar everyday for lunch. Our lunch periods became longer and longer. One afternoon we simply didn't return. But the next morning, like good guys, we were all there. We were told we were no longer wanted. "Now," said the manager, "I've got to hire a whole new god damned crew." "And fire them on Thanksgiving," said one of us. "Listen," said the manager, "You guys want to work one more day?" "So you'll have time to interview and hire our replacements?" asked one of us. "Take it or leave it," said the manager. We took it and we worked all day, laughing like hell, throwing cartons through the air. Then we picked up our final checks and went back to our rooms and our drunken women.

82

It was another fluorescent light fixture house: The Honeybeam Company. Most of the cartons were five or six feet long, and heavy when packed. We worked a ten hour day. The procedure was quite simple—you went out to the assembly line and got your parts, brought them back, and packed them up. Most of the workers were Mexican and black. The blacks worked on me and accused me of having a smart mouth. The Mexicans stood back quietly and watched. Each day was a battle—both for my life and my ability to keep up with the lead packer, Monty. They worked on me all day long.

“Hey, boy. Boy! Come ’ere, boy! Boy, I want to talk to you!”

It was little Eddie. Little Eddie was good at it.

I didn’t answer.

“Boy, I’m talking to you!”

“Eddie, how’d you like to have a jack-handle slid up your ass while you’re singing ‘Old Man River?’”

“How’d you get all those holes in your face, white boy? Fall on a drill while you were asleep?”

“Where’d you get that scar on your lower lip? Your boyfriend keep his razor strapped to his dick?”

I went out at breaktime and traded a few with Big Angel. Big Angel whipped me but I got in some shots, didn’t panic, and held my ground. I knew he had only ten minutes to work on me and that helped. What hurt most was a thumb he got in my eye. We walked back in together, huffing and puffing.

“You’re no pro,” he said.

“Try me sometime when I’m not hungover. I’ll run you right off the lot.”

"O.K.," he said, "come in some time sweet and clean and we'll try it again.

I decided right then to never come in sweet and clean.

Morris was the foreman. He had terribly flat vibes. It was as if he were made of wood, clear through. I tried not to talk to him more than I had to. He was the son of the owner and had tried to make it as a salesman, outside. He failed and they brought him back inside. He walked up. "What happened to your *eye?* It's all *red.*"

"I was walking under a palm tree and I was attacked by a blackbird."

"He got your eye?"

"He got it."

Morris walked off, the crotch of his pants was jammed up into his ass...

The best part was when the assembly line couldn't keep up with us and we stood around waiting. The assembly line was manned mostly by young Mexican girls with beautiful skin and dark eyes; they wore tight bluejeans and tight sweaters and gaudy earrings. They were so young and healthy and efficient and relaxed. They were good workers, and now and then one would look up and say something and then there would be explosions of laughter and glances as I watched them laugh in their tight bluejeans and their tight sweaters and thought, if one of them was in bed with me tonight I could take all this shit a whole lot better. We all were thinking that. And we were also thinking, they all belong to somebody else. Well, what the hell. It didn't make any difference. In fifteen years they'd weigh 185 pounds and it would be their daughters who were beautiful.

I bought an eight-year-old automobile and stayed on the job there through December. Then came the Christmas party. That was December 24th. There were to be drinks, food, music, dancing. I didn't like parties. I didn't know how to dance and people frightened me, especially people at parties. They attempted to be sexy and gay and witty and although they hoped they were good at it, they weren't. They were bad at it. Their trying so hard only made it worse.

So when Jan leaned up against me and said, "Fuck that party, stay home with me. We'll get drunk here," I didn't find that very hard to do.

I heard about the party the day after Christmas. Little Eddie said, "Christine cried when you didn't show up."

"Who?"

"Christine, the cute little Mexican girl."

"Who's that?"

"She works on the back row, in assembly."

"Cut the shit."

"Yeah. She cried and cried. Somebody drew a great big picture of you with your goatee and hung it on the wall and underneath they wrote, 'Give me another drink!'"

"I'm sorry, man. I got tied up."

"It's all right. She finally stopped being mad and danced with me. She got drunk and threw up some cake and she got drunker and danced with all the black guys. She dances real sexy. She finally went home with Big Angel."

"Big Angel probably stuck his thumb in her eye," I said.

The day before New Year's after the afternoon break, Morris called me over and said, "I want to talk to you."

"O.K."

"Over here."

Morris walked me over to a dark corner next to a row of stacked packing boxes. "Listen, we're going to have to let you go."

"All right. This is my last day?"

"Yes."

"Will the check be ready?"

"No, we'll mail it."

"All right."

83

National Bakery Goods was located nearby. They gave me a white smock and a locker. They made cookies, biscuits, cupcakes and so forth. Because I had claimed two years of college on my application, I got the job as Coconut Man. The Coconut Man stood up on a perch, scooped his shovel into the shredded coconut barrel and dumped the white flakes into a machine. The machine did the rest: it spit coconut on the cakes and other sundry items passing below. It was an easy job and a dignified one. There I was, dressed in white, scooping white shredded coconut into a machine. On the other side of the room were dozens of young girls, also dressed in white, with white caps on. I wasn't quite sure what they were doing but they were busy. We worked nights.

It happened my second night. It began slowly, a couple of the girls began singing, "Oh, Henry, oh Henry, how you can love! Oh, Henry, oh Henry, heaven's above!" More and more girls joined in. Soon they were all singing. I thought, surely, they were singing to me.

The girls' supervisor rushed up screaming, "*All right, all right, girls, that's enough!*"

I dipped my shovel calmly into the shredded coconut and accepted it all…

I had been there two or three weeks when a bell rang during the late shift. A voice came over the intercom. "All the men come to the rear of the building."

A man in a business suit walked toward us. "Gather around me," he said. He had a clipboard with a sheet of paper on it. The men circled him. We were all dressed in white smocks. I stood at the edge of the circle.

“We are entering our slack period,” said the man. “I’m sorry to say that we’re going to have to let all of you go until things pick up. Now, if you’ll line up in front of me, I’ll take your names, phone numbers and addresses. When things get better, you’ll be the first to know.”

The men began to form a line but with much jostling and cursing. I didn’t get into line. I looked at all my fellow workers dutifully giving their names and addresses. These, I thought, are the men who dance beautifully at parties. I walked back to my locker, hung up the white smock, left my shovel leaning against the door, and walked out.

84

The Hotel Sans was the best in the city of Los Angeles. It was an old hotel but it had class and a charm missing from the newer places. It was directly across from the park downtown.

It was renowned for businessmens' conventions and expensive hookers of almost legendary talent—who at the end of a lucrative evening had even been known to give the bellboys a little. There also were stories of bellboys who had become millionaires—bloody bellboys with eleven inch dicks who had had the good fortune to meet and marry some rich, elderly guest. And the *food*, the LOBSTER, the huge black chefs in very tall white hats who knew everything, not only about food but about Life and about me and about everything.

I was assigned to the loading dock. That loading dock had *style:* for each truck that came in there were ten guys to unload it when it only took two at the most. I wore my best clothes. I never touched anything.

We unloaded (they unloaded) everything that came into the hotel and most of it was foodstuffs. My guess was that the rich ate more lobster than anything else. Crates and crates of them would come in, deliciously pink and large, waving their claws and feelers.

"You like those things, don't you, Chinaski?"

"Yeah. Oh yeah," I'd drool.

One day the lady in the employment office called me over. The employment office was at the rear of the loading dock. "I want you to manage this office on Sundays, Chinaski." "What do I do?" "Just answer the phone and hire the Sunday dishwashers." "All right!"

The first Sunday was nice. I just sat there. Soon an old guy walked in. “Yeah, buddy?” I asked. He had on an expensive suit, but it was wrinkled and a little dirty; and the cuffs were just starting to go. He was holding his hat in his hand. “Listen,” he asked, “do you need somebody who is a good conversationalist? Somebody who can meet and talk to people? I have a certain amount of charm, I tell gracious stories, I can make people laugh.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Make me laugh.”

“Oh, you don’t understand. The setting has to be right, the mood, the *decor*, you know…”

“Make me laugh.”

“Sir…”

“Can’t use you, you’re a stiff!”

The dishwashers were hired at noon. I stepped out of the office. Forty bums stood there. “All right now, we need five good men! Five *good* ones! No winos, perverts, communists, or child-molestors! And you’ve got to have a social security card! All right now, get them out and hold them up in the air!”

Out came the cards. They waved them.

“Hey, I got one!”

“Hey, buddy, over here! Give a guy a break!”

I slowly looked them over. “O.K., you with the shit-stain on your collar,” I pointed. “Step forward.”

“That’s no shit stain, sir. That’s gravy.”

“Well, I don’t know, buddy, looks to me like you been eatin’ more crotch than roast beef!”

“Ah, hahaha,” went the bums, “Ah, hahaha!”

“O.K., now, I need *four* good dishwashers! I have four pennies here in my hand. I’m going to toss them up. The four men who bring me back a penny get to wash dishes today!”

I tossed the pennies high into the air above the crowd. Bodies jumped and fell, clothing ripped, there were curses, one man screamed, there were several fistfights. Then the lucky four came forward, one at a time, breathing heavily, each with a penny. I gave them their work cards and waved them toward the employee's cafeteria where they would first be fed. The other bums retreated slowly down the loading ramp, jumped off, and walked down the alley into the wasteland of downtown Los Angeles on a Sunday.

85

Sundays were best because I was alone and soon I began to take a pint of whiskey to work with me. One Sunday after a hard night's drinking the bottle got to me; I blacked-out. I vaguely remembered some unusual activity that evening after I went home but it was unclear. I told Jan about it the next morning before I went back to work. "I think I fucked up. But maybe it's my imagination."

I went in and walked up to the timeclock. My timecard was not in the rack. I turned and walked over to the old lady who ran the employment office. When she saw me she looked nervous. "Mrs. Farrington, my timecard is missing."

"Henry, I always thought you were such a nice boy."

"Yes?"

"You don't remember what you did, do you?" she asked, looking nervously around.

"No, Ma'am."

"You were drunk. You cornered Mr. Pelvington in the men's locker room and you wouldn't let him out. You held him captive for thirty minutes."

"What did I do to him?"

"You wouldn't let him out."

"Who is he?"

"The Assistant Manager of this hotel."

"What else did I do?"

"You were lecturing him on how to run this hotel. Mr. Pelvington has been in the hotel business for thirty years. You suggested that prostitutes be registered on the first floor only and that they should be given regular physical examinations. There are no prostitutes in this hotel, Mr. Chinaski."

"Oh, I know that, Mrs. Pelvington."

"Farrington."

"Mrs. Farrington."

"You also told Mr. Pelvington that only two men were needed on the loading dock instead of ten, and that it would cut down on the theft if each employee was given one live lobster to take home each night in a specially constructed cage that could be carried on buses and streetcars."

"You have a real sense of humor, Mrs. Farrington."

"The security guard couldn't get you to let go of Mr. Pelvington. You tore his coat. It was only after we called the regular police that you relented."

"I presume I'm terminated?"

"You have presumed correctly, Mr. Chinaski."

I walked off behind a stack of crates. When Mrs. Farrington wasn't looking I cut for the employee's cafeteria. I still had my food card. I could get one last good meal. The stuff was nearly as good as what they cooked for the guests upstairs, plus they gave the help more of it. Clutching my food card I walked into the cafeteria, picked up a tray, a knife and fork, a cup and some paper napkins. I walked up to the food counter. Then I looked up. Tacked to the wall behind the counter was a piece of white cardboard covered with a large crude scrawl:

DON'T GIVE ANY FOOD TO HENRY CHINASKI

I put the tray back unnoticed. I walked out of the cafeteria. I walked along the loading dock, then I jumped into the alley. Coming toward me was another bum. "Got a smoke, buddy?" he asked. "Yeah." I took out two, gave him one, took one myself. I lit him up, then I lit myself up. He moved east and I moved west.

86

The Farm Labor Market was at Fifth and San Pedro Streets. You reported at 5 a.m. It was still dark when I got there. Men were sitting and standing around, rolling cigarettes and talking quietly. All such places always have the same smell—the smell of stale sweat, urine, and cheap wine.

The day before I had helped Jan move in with a fat real estate operator who lived on Kingsley Drive. I'd stood back out of sight in the hall and watched him kiss her; then they'd gone into his apartment together and the door had closed. I had walked back down the street alone noticing for the first time the pieces of blown paper and accumulated trash that littered the street. We'd been evicted from our apartment. I had $2.08. Jan promised me she'd be waiting when my luck changed but I hardly believed that. The real estate operator's name was Jim Bemis, he had an office on Alvarado Street and plenty of cash. "I hate it when he fucks me," Jan had said. She was now probably saying the same thing about me to him.

Oranges and tomatoes were piled in several crates and apparently were free. I took an orange, bit into the skin and sucked on it. I had exhausted my unemployment benefits since leaving the Sans Hotel.

A guy about forty walked up to me. His hair looked dyed, in fact it didn't look like human hair but more like thread. The hard overhead light shone down on him. He had brown moles on his face, mostly clustered around his mouth. One or two black hairs grew out of each one.

"How you doing?" he asked.

"O.K."

"How'd you like a blow job?"

"No, I don't think so."

"I'm hot, man, I'm excited. I really do it good."

"Listen, I'm sorry, I'm not in the mood."

He walked off angrily. I looked about the large room. There were fifty men waiting. There were ten or twelve state employment clerks sitting at their desks or walking around. They smoked cigarettes and looked more worried than the bums. The clerks were separated from the bums by a heavy wire mesh fence that went from floor to ceiling. Somebody had painted it yellow. It was a very indifferent yellow.

When a clerk had to make a transaction with a bum he unlocked and slid open a small glass window in the wire. When the paperwork was taken care of the clerk would slid the glass window shut, lock it from the inside, and each time it happened, hope seemed to vanish. We all came awake when the window would slide open, any man's chance was our chance, but when it closed, hope evaporated. Then we had each other to look at.

Along the back wall, behind the yellow screen and behind the clerks, were six blackboards. There was white chalk and erasers, just like in grammar school. Five of the blackboards were washed clean, although it was possible to see the ghost of previous messages, of jobs long filled and now lost forever as far as we were concerned.

There was a message on the sixth blackboard:

TOMATO PICKERS WANTED IN BAKERSFIELD

I had thought that machines had put the tomato pickers out of work. Yet, there it was. Humans apparently were less expensive than machines. And machines broke down. Ah.

I looked around the waiting room—there were no Orientals, no Jews, almost no blacks. Most of the bums were poor whites or Chicano. The one or two blacks were already drunk on wine.

Now one of the clerks stood up. He was a big man with a beer gut. What you noticed was his yellow shirt with vertical black stripes. The shirt was overstarched, and he wore armbands—to hold up his sleeves like in photographs taken in the 90's. He walked over and unlocked the glass window in the yellow screen.

"All right! There's a truck in back loading up for Bakersfield!"

He slid the window shut, locked it, sat down at his desk and lit a cigarette.

For a moment nobody moved. Then one by one those sitting on the benches began to get up and stretch, their faces expressionless. The men who had been standing dropped their cigarettes on the floor and put them out carefully with the soles of their shoes. Then a slow general exodus began; everyone filed out a side door into a fenced yard.

The sun was coming up. We really looked at each other for the first time. A few men grinned at the sight of a familiar face.

We stood in a line, pushing our way toward the back of the truck, the sun coming up. It was time to get going. We were climbing into a World War II army truck with a high canvas roof, torn. We moved forward, pushing rudely, but at the same time trying to be at least half-polite. Then I got tired of the elbows, I stepped back.

The truck's capacity was admirable. The big Mexican foreman stood to one side at the back of the truck, waving them on in, "All right, all right, let's go, let's go…"

The men moved forward slowly, as if into the mouth of the whale.

Through the side of the truck I could see the faces; they were talking quietly and smiling. At the same time I disliked them and felt lonely. Then I decided I could handle tomatoes; I decided to get in. Someone banged into me from behind. It was a fat Mexican woman and she seemed quite emotional. I took her by the hips and boosted her. She was very heavy. She was hard to manage. Finally I got hold of something; it seemed one of my hands had slipped into the deepest recess of her crotch. I boosted her in. Then I reached up to get a grip and pull myself in. I was the last one. The Mexican foreman put his foot on my hand. "No," he said, "we've got enough."

The truck's engine started, stalled, stopped. The driver hit it again. It started and they rolled off.

87

Workmen For Industry was located right on the edge of skid row. The bums were better dressed, younger, but just as listless. They sat around on the window ledges, hunched forward, getting warm in the sun and drinking the free coffee that W.F.I. offered. There was no cream and sugar, but it was free. There was no wire partition separating us from the clerks. The telephones rang more often and the clerks were much more relaxed than at the Farm Labor Market.

I walked up to the counter and was given a card and a pen anchored by a chain. "Fill it out," said the clerk, a nice-looking Mexican boy who tried to hid his warmth behind a professional manner.

I began to fill out the card. After address and phone number I wrote: "none." Then after education and work abilities I wrote: "two years L.A. City College. Journalism and Fine Arts."

Then I told the clerk, "I ruined this card. Could I have another?"

He gave me one. I wrote instead: "Graduate, L.A. High School. Shipping clerk, warehouseman, laborer. Some typing."

I handed the card back.

"All right," said the clerk, "sit down and we'll see if anything comes in."

I found a space on a window ledge and sat down. An old black man was sitting next to me. He had an interesting face; he didn't have the usual resigned look that most of us sitting around the room had. He looked as if he was attempting not to laugh at himself and the rest of us.

He saw me glancing at him. He grinned. "Guy who runs this place is sharp. He got fired by the Farm Labor, got pissed, came down here and started this. Specializes in part-time workers. Some guy wants a boxcar unloaded quick and cheap, he calls here."

"Yeah, I've heard."

"Guy needs a boxcar unloaded quick and cheap, he calls here. Guy who runs this place takes 50 per cent. We don't complain. We take what we can get."

"It's O.K. with me. Shit."

"You look down in the mouth. You all right?"

"Lost a woman."

"You'll have others and lose them too."

"Where do they go?"

"Try some of this."

It was a bottle in a bag. I took a hit. Port wine.

"Thanks."

"Ain't no women on skid row."

He passed the bottle to me again. "Don't let him see us drinking. That's the one thing makes him mad."

While we sat drinking several men were called and left for jobs. It cheered us. At least there was some action.

My black friend and I waited, passing the bottle back and forth.

Then it was empty.

"Where's the nearest liquor store?" I asked.

I got the directions and left. Somehow it was always hot on skid row in Los Angeles in the daytime. You'd see old bums walking around in heavy overcoats in the heat. But when the night came down and the Mission was full, those overcoats came in handy.

When I got back from the liquor store my friend was still there.

I sat down and opened the bottle, passed the bag.

"Keep it low," he said.

It was comfortable in there drinking the wine.

A few gnats began to gather and circle in front of us.

"Wine gnats," he said.

"Sons of bitches are hooked."

"They know what's good."

"They drink to forget their women."

"They just drink."

I waved at them in the air and got one of the wine gnats. When I opened my hand all I could see in my palm was a speck of black and the strange sight of two little wings. Zero.

"Here he comes!"

It was the nice-looking young guy who ran the place. He rushed up to us. "All right! Get out of here! Get the hell out of here, you fuckin' winos! Get the hell out of here before I call the cops!"

He hustled us both to the door, pushing and cursing. I felt guilty, but I felt no anger. Even as he pushed I knew that he didn't really care what we did. He had a large ring on his right hand.

We didn't move fast enough and I caught the ring just over my left eye; I felt the blood start to come and then felt it swell up. My friend and I were back out on the street.

We walked away. We found a doorway and sat on the step. I handed him the bottle. He hit it.

"Good stuff."

He handed me the bottle. I hit it.

"Yeah, good stuff."

"Sun's up."

"Yeah, the sun's up good."

We sat quietly, passing the bottle back and forth.

Then the bottle was empty.

"Well," he said, "I gotta be going."

"See you."

He walked off. I got up, went the other way, turned the corner, and walked up Main Street. I went along until I came to the Roxie.

Photos of the strippers were on display behind the glass out front. I walked up and bought a ticket. The girl in the cage looked better than the photos. Now I had 38 cents left. I walked into the dark theatre eight rows from the front. The first three rows were packed.

I had lucked out. The movie was over and the first stripper was already on. Darlene. The first was usually the worst, an old-timer come down, now reduced to kicking leg in the chorus line most of the time. We had Darlene for openers. Probably someone had been murdered or was on the rag or was having a screaming fit, and this was Darlene's chance to dance solo again.

But Darlene was fine. Skinny, but with breasts. A body like a willow. At the end of that slim back, that slim body, was an enormous behind. It was like a miracle—enough to drive a man crazy.

Darlene was dressed in a long black velvet gown slit very high—her calves and thighs were dead white against the black. She danced and looked out at us through heavily mascaraed eyes. This was her chance. She wanted to come back—to be a featured dancer once again. I was with her. As she worked at the zippers more and more of her began to show, to slip out of that sophisticated black velvet, leg and white flesh. Soon she was down to her pink bra and G-string—the fake diamonds swinging and flashing as she danced.

Darlene danced over and grabbed the stage curtain. The curtain was torn and thick with dust. She grabbed it, dancing to the beat of the four man band and in the light of the pink spotlight.

She began to fuck that curtain. The band rocked in rhythm. Darlene really gave it to that curtain; the band rocked and she rocked. The pink light abruptly switched to purple. The band stepped it up, played all out. She appeared to climax. Her head fell back, her mouth opened.

Then she straightened and danced back to the center of the stage. From where I was sitting I could hear her singing to herself over the music. She took a hold of her pink bra and ripped it off and a guy three rows down lit a cigarette. There was just the G-string now. She pushed her finger into her bellybutton, and moaned.

Darlene remained dancing at stage center. The band was playing very softly. She began a gentle grind. She was fucking us. The beaded G-string was swaying slowly. Then the four man band began to pick up gradually once again. They were reaching for the culmination of the act; the drummer was cracking rim-shots like firecrackers; they looked tired, desperate.

Darlene fingered her naked breasts, showing them to us, her eyes filled with the dream, her lips moist and parted. Then suddenly she turned and waved her enormous behind at us. The beads leaped and flashed, went crazy, sparkled. The spotlight shook and danced like the sun. The four man band crackled and banged. Darlene spun around. She tore away the beads. I looked, they looked. We could see her cunt hairs through the flesh-colored gauze. The band really spanked her ass.

And I couldn’t get it up.

About the Author

CHARLES BUKOWSKI is one of America's best-known contemporary writers of poetry and prose, and, many would claim, its most influential and imitated poet. He was born in Andernach, Germany, to an American soldier father and a German mother in 1920, and brought to the United States at the age of three. He was raised in Los Angeles and lived there for fifty years. He published his first story in 1944 when he was twenty-four and began writing poetry at the age of thirty-five. He died in San Pedro, California, on March 9, 1994, at the age of seventy-three, shortly after completing his last novel, *Pulp* (1994).

During his lifetime he published more than forty-five books of poetry and prose, including the novels *Post Office* (1971), *Factotum* (1975), *Women* (1978), *Ham on Rye* (1982), and *Hollywood* (1989). Among his most recent books are the posthumous editions of *sifting through the madness for the Word, the line, the way (2003), The Flash of Lightning Behind the Mountain* (2004), *Slouching Toward Nirvana* (2005), and *Come On In!* (2006).

All of Bukowski's books have now been published in translation in more than a dozen languages as his worldwide popularity continues to grow.

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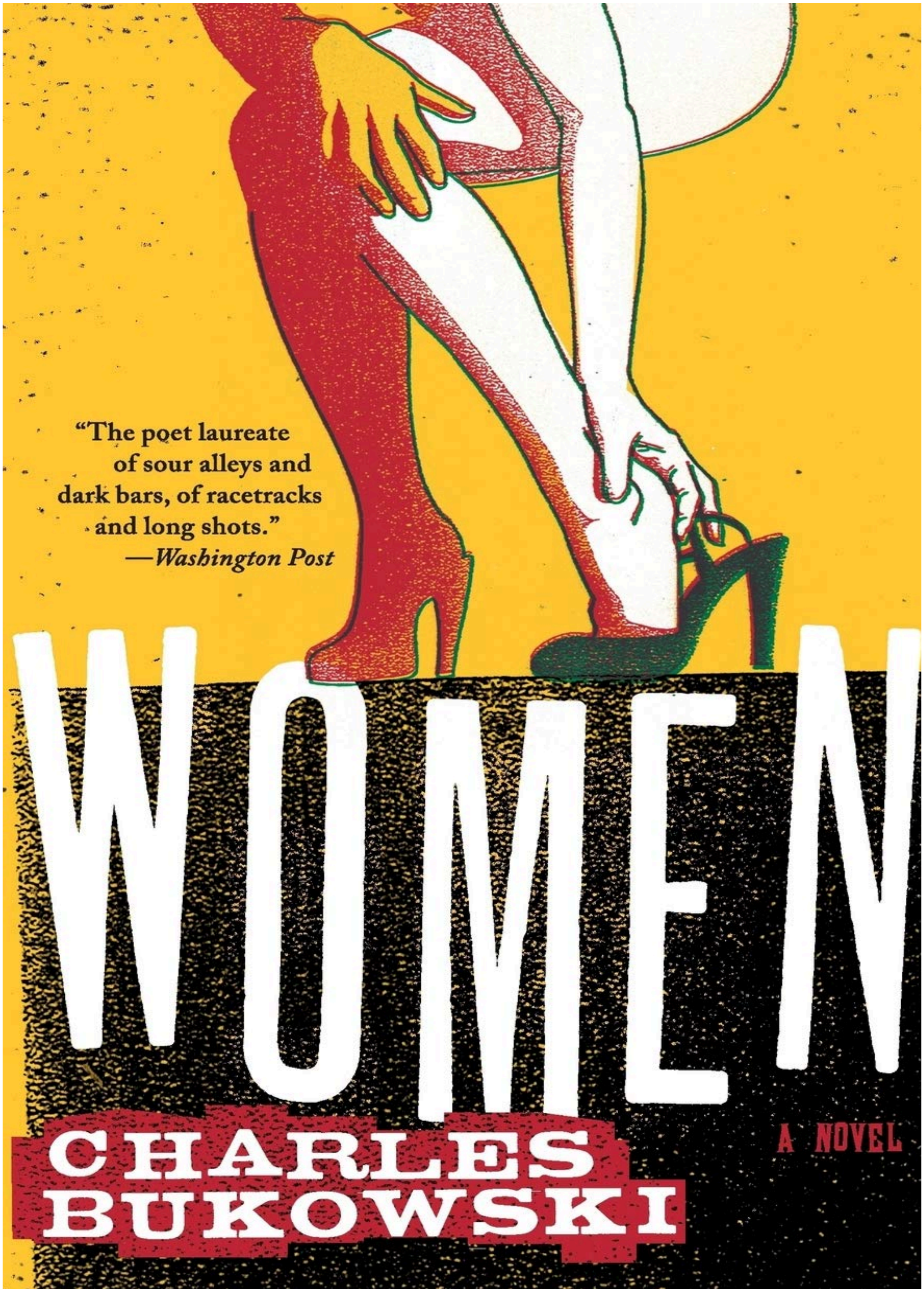

"The poet laureate
of sour alleys and
dark bars, of racetracks
and long shots."
—*Washington Post*

WOMEN

A NOVEL

CHARLES
BUKOWSKI

WOMEN

-

CHARLES BUKOWSKI

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ISBN: 978-0-06-117759-0 (reprint) ISBN-10: 0-06-117759-8 (reprint) Women "Many a good man has been put under the bridge by a woman."

—HENRY CHINASKI

This novel is a work of fiction and no character is intended to portray any person or combination of persons living or dead.

1

I was 50 years old and hadn't been to bed with a woman for four years. I had no women friends. I looked at them as I passed them on the streets or wherever I saw them, but I looked at them without yearning and with a sense of futility. I masturbated regularly, but the idea of having a relationship with a woman— even on non-sexual terms—was beyond my imagination. I had a 6 year old daughter born out of wedlock. She lived with her mother and I paid child support. I had been married years before at the age of 35. That marriage lasted two and one half years. My wife divorced me. I had been in love only once. She had died of acute alcoholism. She died at 48 when I was 38. My wife had been 12 years younger than I. I believe that she too is dead now, although I'm not sure. She wrote me a long letter each Christmas for 6 years after the divorce. I never responded… .

I'm not sure when I first saw Lydia Vance. It was about 6 years ago and I had just quit a twelve year job as a postal clerk and was trying to be a writer. I was terrified and drank more than ever. I was attempting my first novel. I drank a pint of whiskey and two six packs of beer each night while writing. I smoked cheap cigars and typed and drank and listened to classical music on the radio until dawn. I set a goal of ten pages a night but I never knew until the next day how many pages I had written. I'd get up in the morning, vomit, then walk to the front room and look on the couch to see how many pages were there. I always exceeded my ten. Sometimes there were 17, 18, 23, 25 pages. Of course, the work of each night had to be cleaned up or thrown away. It took me twenty-one nights to write my first novel.

The owners of the court where I then lived, who lived in the back, thought I was crazy. Each morning when I awakened there would be a large brown paper bag on the porch. The contents varied but mostly the bags contained tomatoes, radishes, oranges, green onions, cans of soup, red onions. I drank beer with them every other night until 4 or 5 am. The old man would pass out and the old lady and I would hold hands and I'd kiss her now and then. I always gave her a big one at the door. She was terribly wrinkled but she couldn't help that. She was Catholic and looked cute when she put on her pink hat and went to church on Sunday morning.

I think I met Lydia Vance at my first poetry reading. It was at a bookstore on Kenmore Ave., The Drawbridge. Again, I was terrified. Superior yet terrified. When I walked in there was standing room only. Peter, who ran the store and was living with a black girl, had a pile of cash in front of him. "Shit," he said to me, "if I could always pack them in like this I'd have enough money to take another trip to India!" I walked in and they began applauding. As far as poetry readings were concerned, I was about to bust my cherry.

I read 30 minutes then called a break. I was still sober and I could feel the eyes staring at me from out of the dark. A few people came up and talked to me. Then during a lull Lydia Vance walked up. I was sitting at a table drinking beer. She put both hands on the edge of the table, bent over and looked at me. She had long brown hair, quite long, a prominent nose, and one eye didn't quite match the other. But she projected vitality—you knew that she was there. I could feel vibrations running between us. Some of the vibrations were confused and were not good but they were there. She looked at me and I looked back. Lydia Vance had on a suede cowgirl jacket with a fringe around the neck. Her breasts were good. I told her, "I'd like to rip that fringe off your jacket—we could begin there!" Lydia walked off. It hadn't worked. I never knew what to say to the ladies. But she had a behind. I watched that beautiful behind as she walked away. The seat of her bluejeans cradled it and I watched it as she walked away.

I finished the second half of the reading and forgot about Lydia just as I forgot about the women I passed on the sidewalks. I took my money, signed some napkins, some pieces of paper, then left, and drove back home.

I was still working each night on the first novel. I never started writing until 6:18 pm. That was when I used to punch in at the Terminal Annex Post Office. It was 6 pm when they arrived: Peter and Lydia Vance. I opened the door. Peter said, “Look, Henry, look what I brought you!”

Lydia jumped up on the coffee table. Her bluejeans fit tighter than ever. She flung her long brown hair from side to side. She was insane; she was miraculous. For the first time I considered the possibility of actually making love to her. She began reciting poetry. Her own. It was very bad. Peter tried to stop her, “No! No! No rhyming poetry in Henry Chinaski’s house!”

“Let her go, Peter!”

I wanted to watch her buttocks. She strode up and down that old coffeetable. Then she danced. She waved her arms. The poetry was terrible, the body and the madness weren’t.

Lydia jumped down.

“How’d you like it, Henry?”

“What?”

“The poetry.”

“Hardly.”

Lydia stood there with her sheets of poetry in her hand. Peter grabbed her. “Let’s fuck!” he said to her. “Come on, let’s fuck!”

She pushed him off.

“All right,” Peter said. “Then I’m leaving!”

“So leave. I’ve got my car,” Lydia said. “I can get back to my place.”

Peter ran to the door. He stopped and turned. “All right, Chinaski! Don’t forget what I brought you!”

He slammed the door and was gone. Lydia sat down on the couch, near the door. I sat about a foot away from her. I looked at her. She looked marvelous. I was afraid. I reached out and touched her long hair. The hair was magic. I pulled my hand away. “Is all that hair really yours?” I asked. I knew it was. “Yes,” she said, “it is.” I put my hand under her chin and very awkwardly I tried to turn her head toward mine. I was not confident in these situations. I kissed her lightly.

Lydia jumped up. “I’ve got to go. I’m paying a baby sitter.”

“Look,” I said, “stay. I’ll pay. Just stay a while.”

“No, I can’t,” she said, “I’ve got to go.”

She walked to the door. I followed her. She opened the door. Then she turned. I reached for her one last time. She lifted up her face and gave me the tiniest kiss. Then she pulled away and put some typed papers in my hand. The door closed. I sat on the couch with the papers in my hand and listened to her car start.

The poems were stapled together, mimeographed and called HERRRR. I read some of them. They were interesting, full of humor and sexuality, but badly written. They were by Lydia and her three sisters—all so jolly and brave and sexy together. I threw the sheets away and I opened my pint of whiskey. It was dark outside. The radio played mostly Mozart and Brahms and the Bee.

2

A day or so later I got a poem in the mail from Lydia. It was a long poem and it began: Come out, old troll, Come out of your dark hole, old troll, Come out into the sunlight with us and Let us put daisies in your hair …

The poem went on to tell me how good it would feel to dance in the fields with female fawn creatures who would bring me joy and true knowledge. I put the letter in a dresser drawer.

I was awakened the next morning by a knocking on the glass panes of my front door. It was 10:30 am.

“Go away,” I said.

“It’s Lydia.”

“All right. Wait a minute.”

I put on a shirt and some pants and opened the door. Then I ran to the bathroom and vomited. I tried to brush my teeth but only vomited again—the sweetness of the toothpaste turned my stomach. I came out.

“You’re sick,” Lydia said. “Do you want me to leave?”

“Oh no, I’m all right. I always wake up like this.”

Lydia looked good. The light came through the curtains and shone on her. She had an orange in her hand and was tossing it into the air. The orange spun through the sunlit morning.

“I can’t stay,” she said, “but I want to ask you something.”

“Sure.”

“I’m a sculptress. I want to sculpt your head.”

“All right.”

“You’ll have to come to my place. I don’t have a studio. We’ll have to do it at my place. That won’t make you nervous, will it?”

“No.”

I wrote down her address, and instructions how to get there.

“Try to show up by eleven in the morning. The kids come home from school in mid-afternoon and it’s distracting.”

"I'll be there at eleven," I told her.

I sat across from Lydia in her breakfast nook. Between us was a large mound of clay. She began asking questions.

"Are your parents still alive?"

"No."

"You like L.A.?"

"It's my favorite city."

"Why do you write about women the way you do?"

"Like what?"

"You know."

"No, I don't."

"Well, I think it's a damned shame that a man who writes as well as you do just doesn't know anything about women."

I didn't answer.

"Damn it! What did Lisa do with … ?" She began searching the room. "Oh, little girls who run off with their mother's tools!"

Lydia found another one. "I'll make this one do. Hold still now, relax but hold still."

I was facing her. She worked at the mound of clay with a wooden tool tipped with a loop of wire. She waved the tool at me over the mound of clay. I watched her. Her eyes looked at me.

They were large, dark brown. Even her bad eye, the one that didn't quite match the other, looked good. I looked back. Lydia worked. Time passed. I was in a trance. Then she said, "How about a break? Care for a beer?"

"Fine. Yes."

When she got up to go to the refrigerator I followed her. She got the bottle out and closed the door. As she turned I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to me. I put my mouth and body against hers. She held the beer bottle out at arm's length with one hand. I kissed her. I kissed her again. Lydia pushed me away.

"All right," she said, "enough. We have work to do."

We sat back down and I drank my beer while Lydia smoked a cigarette, the clay between us. Then the doorbell rang. Lydia got up. A fat woman stood there with frantic, pleading eyes.

"This is my sister, Glendoline."

"Hi."

Glendoline pulled up a chair and started talking. She could talk. If she was a sphinx she could have talked, if she was a stone she could have talked. I wondered when she'd get tired and leave. Even after I stopped listening it was like being battered with tiny pingpong balls. Glendoline had no concept of time or any idea that she might be intruding. She talked on and on.

"Listen," I said finally, "when are you going to leave?"

Then a sister act began. They began talking to each other. They were both standing up, waving their arms at each other. The voices pitched higher. They threatened each other with physical harm. At last—near the world's end—Glendoline did a gigantic twist of torso and flung herself out of the doorway through the large flapbang of the screen door and was gone—but still heard, ignited and bemoaning—down to her apartment in the back of the court.

Lydia and I walked back to the breakfast nook and sat down. She picked up her sculptor's tool. Her eyes looked into mine.

3

One morning a few days later I entered Lydia's courtyard as she was walking in from the alley. She had been over to see her friend Tina who lived in an apartment house on the corner. She looked electric that morning, much like the first time she had come over, with the orange.

"Ooooh," she said, "you've got on a new shirt!"

It was true. I had bought the shirt because I was thinking about her, about seeing her. I knew that she knew that, and was making fun of me, yet I didn't mind.

Lydia unlocked the door and we went inside. The clay sat in the center of the breakfast nook table under a wet cloth. She pulled the cloth off. "What do you think?"

Lydia hadn't spared me. The scars were there, the alcoholic nose, the monkey mouth, the eyes narrowed to slits, and there was the dumb, pleased grin of a happy man, ridiculous, feeling his luck and wondering why. She was 30 and I was over 50. I didn't care.

"Yes," I said, "you've got me down. I like it. But it looks almost finished. I'm going to be depressed when it's done. There have been some great mornings and afternoons."

"Has it interfered with your writing?"

"No, I only write after it gets dark. I can never write in the day."

Lydia picked up her modeling tool and looked at me. "Don't worry. I have a lot more work to do. I want to get this one right."

At her first break she got a pint of whiskey out of the refrigerator.

"Ah," I said.

"How much?" she asked holding up a tall water glass.

"Half and half."

She fixed the drink and I drank it right down.

"I've heard about you," she said.

"Like what?"

"About how you throw guys off your front porch. That you beat your women."

"Beat my women?"

"Yes, somebody told me."

I grabbed Lydia and we went into our longest kiss ever. I held her against the edge of the sink and began rubbing my cock against her. She pushed me away but I caught her again in the center of the kitchen.

Lydia's hand reached for mine and pushed it down the front of her jeans and into her panties. One fingertip felt the top of her cunt. She was wet. As I continued to kiss her I worked my finger down into her cunt. Then I pulled my hand out, broke away, got the pint and poured myself another drink. I sat back down at the breakfast nook table and Lydia went around to the other side, sat down and looked at me. Then she began working on the clay again. I drank my whiskey slowly.

"Look," I said, "I know your tragedy."

"What?"

"I know your tragedy."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen," I said, "just forget it."

"I want to know."

"I don't want to hurt your feelings."

"I want to know what the hell you're talking about."

"O.K., if you give me another drink I'll tell you."

"All right." Lydia took my empty glass and gave me half-whiskey, half-water. I drank it down again.

"Well?" she asked.

"Hell, you know."

"Know what?"

"You've got a big pussy."

"What?"

"It's not uncommon. You've had two children."

Lydia sat silently working on the clay. Then she laid down her tool. She walked over to the corner of the kitchen near the back door. I watched her bend down and pull her boots off. Then she pushed down her jeans and her panties. Her cunt was right there looking at me.

"All right, you bastard," she said. "I'm going to show you you're wrong."

I took off my shoes, pants and shorts. I got down on my knees on the linoleum floor, and then eased down on top of her, stretching out. I began to kiss her. I hardened quickly and felt myself penetrate her.

I began to stroke … one, two, three… .

There was a knock on the front door. It was a child's knock—tiny fists, frantic, persistent. Lydia quickly pushed me off. "It's Lisa! She didn't go to school today! She's been over at… ."Lydia jumped up and began pulling her clothes on.

"Get dressed!" she said to me.

I got dressed as quickly as I could. Lydia went to the door and there was her five year old daughter: "MOMMY! MOMMY! I cut my finger!"

I wandered into the front room. Lydia had Lisa on her lap. "Oooo, let Mommy see. Oooo, let Mommy kiss your finger. Mommy will make it better!"

"MOMMY, it hurts!"

I looked at the cut. It was almost invisible.

"Look," I told Lydia finally, "I'll see you tomorrow."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"I know."

Lisa looked up at me, the tears were coming and coming.

"Lisa won't let anything bad happen to her Momma," Lydia said.

I opened the door, closed the door and walked to my 1962 Mercury Comet.

4

I was editing a little magazine at the time, The Laxative Approach. I had two co-editors and we felt that we were printing the best poets of our time. Also some of the other kind. One of the editors was a 6-foot-2 subnormal high school drop-out, Kenneth Mulloch (black), who was supported partly by his mother and partly by his sister. The other editor was Sammy Levinson (Jewish), 27, who lived with his parents and was supported by them.

The sheets were printed. Now we had to collate them and staple them into the covers.

"What you do," said Sammy, "is throw a collating party. You serve drinks and a little bullshit and let them do the work."

"I hate parties," I said.

"I'll do the inviting," said Sammy.

"All right," I said, and I invited Lydia.

The night of the party Sammy arrived with the sheets already collated. He was a nervous sort with a head-tic and he hadn't been able to wait to see his own poems in print. He had collated The Laxative Approach all by himself, and then stapled the covers on. Kenneth Mulloch was not to be found—he probably was either in jail or had been committed.

People arrived. I knew very few of them. I walked to my landlady's in the back court. She came to the door.

"I'm having a big party, Mrs. O'Keefe. I want you and your husband to come. Plenty of beer, pretzels and chips."

"Oh, my God, no!"

"What's the matter?"

"I've seen the people going in there! Those beards and all that hair and those raggedy-ass clothes! Bracelets and beads … they look like a bunch of communists! How can you stand people like that?"

“I can’t stand those people either, Mrs. O’Keefe. We just drink beer and talk. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“You watch them. That kind will steal the plumbing.”

She closed the door.

Lydia arrived late. She came through the door like an actress. The first thing I noticed was her large cowboy hat with a lavender feather pinned to the side. She didn’t speak to me but immediately sat down next to a young bookstore clerk and began an intense conversation with him. I began drinking more heavily and some of the drive and humor left my conversation. The bookstore clerk was a good enough sort, trying to be a writer. His name was Randy Evans but he was too far into Kafka to accomplish any kind of literary clarity. We had published him in The Laxative Approach rather than hurt his feelings and also to get distribution for the magazine through his bookstore.

I drank my beer and wandered around. I walked out on the back porch, sat on the stoop in the alley and watched a large black cat trying to get into a garbage can. I walked down towards him. He leaped off the garbage can as I approached. He stood 3 or 4 feet away watching me. I took the lid off the garbage can. The stench was horrible. I puked into the can. I dropped the lid on the pavement. The cat leaped up, stood, all four feet together upon the rim of the can. He hesitated, then brilliant under a half-moon, he leaped into it all.

Lydia was still talking to Randy, and I noticed that under the table one of her feet was touching one of Randy’s. I opened another beer.

Sammy had the crowd laughing. I was a little better at it than he was when I wanted to get the crowd laughing but I wasn’t very good that night. There were 15 or 16 men and two women—Lydia and April. April was on ATD and fat. She was stretched out on the floor. After an hour or so she got up and left with Carl, a burned-out speed freak. That left 15 or 16 men and Lydia. I found a pint of scotch in the kitchen, took it out on the back porch, and had a bite now and then.

The men began leaving gradually as the night went on. Even Randy Evans left. Finally there was only Sammy, Lydia and myself. Lydia was talking to Sammy. Sammy said some funny things. I was able to laugh. Then he said he had to go.

"Please don't go, Sammy," said Lydia.

"Let the kid go," I said.

"Yeah, I gotta go," said Sammy.

After Sammy left Lydia said, "You didn't have to drive him away. Sammy's funny, Sammy's really funny. You hurt his feelings."

"But I want to talk to you alone, Lydia."

"I enjoy your friends. I don't get to meet all kinds of people the way you do. I like people!"

"I don't."

"I know you don't. But I do. People come to see you. Maybe if they didn't come to see you you'd like them better."

"No, the less I see them the better I like them."

"You hurt Sammy's feelings."

"Oh shit, he's gone home to his mother."

"You're jealous, you're insecure. You think I want to go to bed with every man I talk to."

"No I don't. Listen, how about a little drink?"

I got up and mixed her one. Lydia lit a long cigarette and sipped at her drink. "You sure look good in that hat," I said. "That purple feather is something."

"It's my father's hat."

"Won't he miss it?"

"He's dead."

I pulled Lydia over to the couch and gave her a long kiss. She told me about her father. He had died and left all 4 sisters a bit of money. That had enabled them to be independent and had enabled Lydia to divorce her husband. She also told me she'd had some kind of breakdown and spent time in a madhouse. I kissed her again. "Look," I said, "let's lay down on the bed. I'm tired."

To my surprise she followed me into the bedroom. I stretched out on the bed and felt her sit down. I closed my eyes and could tell she was pulling her boots off. I heard one boot hit the floor, then the other. I began to undress on the bed. I reached up and shut off the overhead light. I continued undressing. We kissed some more.

"How long has it been since you've had a woman?"

"Four years."

"Four years?"

"Yes."

"I think you deserve some love," she said. "I had a dream about you. I opened your chest like a cabinet, it had doors, and when I opened the doors I saw all kinds of soft things inside you—teddy bears, tiny fuzzy animals, all these soft, cuddly things. Then I had a dream about this other man. He walked up to me and handed me some pieces of paper. He was a writer. I took the pieces of paper and looked at them. And the pieces of paper had cancer. His writing had cancer. I go by my dreams. You deserve some love."

We kissed again.

"Listen," she said, "after you stick that thing inside me, pull it out just before you come. O.K.?"

"I understand."

I climbed on top of her. It was good. It was something happening, something real, and with a girl 20 years younger than I was and really, after all, beautiful. I did about 10 strokes—and came inside of her.

She leaped up.

"You son-of-a-bitch! You came inside of me!"

"Lydia, it's been so long … it felt so good … I couldn't help it. It sneaked up on me! Honest to Christ, I couldn't help it."

She ran into the bathroom and let the water run into the tub. She stood in front of the mirror running a comb through her long brown hair. She was truly beautiful.

"You son-of-a-bitch! God, what a dumb high school trick. That's high school shit! And it couldn't have happened at a worse time! Well, we're shackjobs now! We're shackjobs now!"

I moved toward her in the bathroom. "Lydia, I love you."

"Get the hell away from me!"

She pushed me out, closed the door, and I stood out in the hall, listening to the bath water run.

5

I didn't see Lydia for a couple of days, although I did manage to phone her 6 or 7 times during that period. Then the weekend arrived. Her ex-husband, Gerald, always took the children over the weekend.

I drove up to her court about 11 am that Saturday morning and knocked. She was in tight bluejeans, boots, orange blouse. Her eyes seemed a darker brown than ever and in the sunlight, as she opened the door, I noticed a natural red in her dark hair. It was startling. She allowed me to kiss her, then she locked the door behind us and we went to my car. We had decided on the beach—not for bathing—it was mid-winter—but for something to do.

We drove along. It felt good having Lydia in the car with me.

"That was some party," she said. "You call that a collating party? That was a copulating party, that's what that was. A copulating party!"

I drove with one hand and rested the other on her inner thigh. I couldn't help myself. Lydia didn't seem to notice. As I drove along the hand slid down between her legs. She went on talking. Suddenly she said, "Take you hand off. That's my pussy!"

"Sorry," I said.

Neither of us said anything until we reached the parking lot at Venice beach. "You want a sandwich and a Coke or something?" I asked. "All right," she said.

We went into the small Jewish delicatessen to get the things and we took them to a knoll of grass that overlooked the sea. We had sandwiches, pickles, chips and soft drinks. The beach was almost deserted and the food tasted fine. Lydia was not talking. I was amazed at how quickly she ate. She ripped into her sandwich with a savagery, took large swallows of Coke, ate half a pickle in one bite and reached for a handful of potato chips. I am, on the contrary, a very slow eater.

Passion, I thought, she has passion.

"How's that sandwich?" I asked.

"Pretty good. I was hungry."

"They make good sandwiches. Do you want anything else?"

"Yes, I'd like a candy bar."

"What kind?"

"Oh, any kind. Something good."

I took a bite of my sandwich, a swallow of Coke, putthem down and walked over to the store. I bought two candy bars so that she might have a choice. As I walked back a tall black man was moving toward the knoll. It was a chilly day but he had his shirt off and he had a very muscular body. He appeared to be in his early twenties. He walked very slowly and erect. He had a long slim neck and a gold earring hung from the left ear. He passed in front of Lydia, along the sand on the ocean side of the knoll. I came up and sat down beside Lydia.

"Did you see that guy?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Jesus Christ, here I am with you, you're twenty years older than I am. I could have something like that. What the hell's wrong with me?"

"Look. Here are a couple of candy bars. Take one."

She took one, ripped the paper off, took a bite and watched the young black man as he walked away along the shore.

"I'm tired of the beach," she said, "let's go back to my place."

We remained apart a week. Then one afternoon I was over at Lydia's place and we were on her bed, kissing. Lydia pulled away.

"You don't know anything about women, do you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I can tell by reading your poems and stories that you just don't know anything about women."

"Tell me more."

"Well, I mean for a man to interest me he's got to eat my pussy. Have you ever eaten pussy?"

"No."

"You're over 50 years old and you've never eaten pussy?"

"No."

"It's too late."

"Why?"

"You can't teach an old dog new tricks."

"Sure you can."

"No, it's too late for you."

"I've always been a slow starter."

Lydia got up and walked into the other room. She came back with a pencil and a piece of paper. "Now, look, I want to show you something." She began to draw on the paper. "Now, this is a cunt, and here is something you probably don't know about—the clit. That's where the feeling is. The clit hides, you see, it comes out now and then, it's pink and very sensitive. Sometimes it will hide from you and you have to find it, you just touch it with the tip of your tongue. …"

"O.K.," I said, "I've got it."

"I don't think you can do it. I tell you, you can't teach an old dog new tricks."

"Let's take our clothes off and lay down."

We undressed and stretched out. I began kissing Lydia. I dropped from the lips to the neck, then down to the breasts. Then I was down at the bellybutton. I moved lower.

"No you can't," she said. "Blood and pee come out of there, think of it, blood and pee. …"

I got down there and began licking. She had drawn an accurate picture for me. Everything was where it was supposed to be. I heard her breathing heavily, then moaning. It excited me. I got a hard-on. The clit came out but it wasn't exactly pink, it was purplish-pink. I teased the clit. Juices appeared and mixed with the cunt hairs. Lydia moaned and moaned. Then I heard the front door open and close. I heard footsteps. I looked up. A small black boy about 5 years old stood beside the bed.

“What the hell do you want?” I asked him.

“You got any empty bottles?” he asked me.

“No, I don’t have any empty bottles,” I told him.

He walked out of the bedroom, into the front room, out the front door and was gone.

“God,” said Lydia, “I thought the front door was locked. That was Bonnie’s little boy.”

Lydia got up and locked the front door. She came back and stretched out. It was about 4 pm on a Saturday afternoon.

I ducked back down.

6

Lydia liked parties. And Harry was a party-giver. So we were on our way to Harry Ascot's. Harry was the editor of Retort, a little magazine. His wife wore long see-through dresses, showed her panties to the men, and went barefoot.

"The first thing I liked about you," said Lydia, "was that you didn't have a t.v. in your place. My ex-husband looked at t.v. every night and all through the weekend. We even had to arrange our lovemaking to fit the t.v. schedule."

"Umm. . . ."

"Another thing I liked about your place was that it was filthy. Beer bottles all over the floor. Lots of trash everywhere. Dirty dishes, and a shit-ring in your toilet, and the crud in your bathtub. All those rusty razorblades laying around the bathroom sink. I knew that you would eat pussy."

"You judge a man according to his surroundings, right?"

"Right. When I see a man with a tidy place I know there's something wrong with him. And if it's too tidy, he's a fag."

We drove up and got out. The apartment was upstairs. The music was loud. I rang the bell. Harry Ascot answered the door. He had a gentle and generous smile. "Come in," he said.

The literary crowd was in there drinking wine and beer, talking, gathered in clusters. Lydia was excited. I looked around and sat down. Dinner was about to be served. Harry was a good fisherman, he was a better fisherman than he was a writer, and a much better fisherman than he was an editor. The Ascots lived on fish while waiting for Harry's talents to start bringing in some money.

Diana, his wife, came out with the plates of fish and passed them around. Lydia sat next to me.

"Now," she said, "this is how you eat a fish. I'm a country girl. Watch me."

She opened that fish, she did something with her knife to the backbone. The fish was in two neat pieces.

"Oh, I really liked that," said Diana. "Where did you say you were from?"

"Utah. Muleshead, Utah. Population ioo. I grew up on a ranch. My father was a drunk. He's dead now. Maybe that's why I'm with him. …" She jerked a thumb at me.

We ate.

After the fish was consumed Diana carried the bones away. Then there was chocolate cake and strong (cheap) red wine.

"Oh, this cake is good," said Lydia, "can I have another piece?"

"Sure, darling," said Diana.

"Mr. Chinaski," said a dark-haired girl from across the room, "I've read translations of your books in Germany. You're very popular in Germany."

"That's nice," I said. "I wish they'd send me some royalties… ."

"Look," said Lydia, "let's not talk about literary crap. Let's do something!" She leaped up and did a bump and a grind. "LET'S DANCE!"

Harry Ascot put on his gentle and generous smile and walked over and turned up the stereo. He turned it up as loud as it would go.

Lydia danced around the room and a young blond boy with ringlets glued to his forehead joined her. They began dancing together. Others got up and danced. I sat there.

Randy Evans was sitting next to me. I could see he was watching Lydia too. He began talking. He talked and he talked. Thankfully I couldn't hear him, the stereo was too loud.

I watched Lydia dance with the boy with the ringlets. Lydia could move it. Her movements lurked upon the sexual. I looked at the other girls and they didn't seem to be dancing that way; but, I thought, that's only because I know Lydia and I don't know them.

Randy kept on talking even though I didn't answer. The dance ended and Lydia came back and sat down next to me.

"Ooooh, I'm pooped! I think I'm out of shape."

Another record dropped into place and Lydia got up and joined the boy with the golden ringlets. I kept drinking beer and wine.

There were many records. Lydia and the boy danced and danced—center stage as the others moved around them, each dance more intimate than the last.

I kept drinking the beer and the wine.

A wild loud dance was in progress… . The boy with the golden ringlets raised both hands above his head. Lydia pressed against him. It was dramatic, erotic. They held their hands high over their heads and pressed their bodies together. Body against body. He kicked his feet back, one at a time. Lydia imitated him. They stared into each other's eyes. I had to admit they were good. The record went on and on. Finally, it ended.

Lydia came back and sat down next to me. "I'm really pooped," she said.

"Look, I said, "I think I've had too much to drink. Maybe we ought to get out of here."

"I've watched you pouring it down."

"Let's go. There'll be other parties."

We got up to leave. Lydia said something to Harry and Diana. When she came back we walked toward the door. As I opened it the boy with the golden ringlets came up to me. "Hey, man, what do you think of me and your girl?"

"You're O.K."

When we got outside I began vomiting, all the beer and the wine came up. It poured and splattered into the brush—across the sidewalk—a gusher in the moonlight. Finally I straightened up and wiped my mouth with my hand.

"That guy worried you, didn't he?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It almost seemed like a fuck, maybe better."

"It didn't mean anything, it was just dancing."

"Suppose that I grabbed a woman on the street like that? Would music make it all right?"

"You don't understand. Each time I finished dancing I came back and sat down next to you."

"O.K., O.K.," I said, "wait a minute."

I puked up another gusher on somebody's dying brush. We walked down the hill out of the Echo Park district toward Hollywood Boulevard.

We got into the car. It started and we drove west down Hollywood toward Vermont.

"You know what we call guys like you?" asked Lydia.

"No."

"We call them," she said, "party-poopers."

7

We came in low over Kansas City, the pilot said the temperature was 20 degrees, and there I was in my thin California sports coat and shirt, lightweight pants, summer stockings, and holes in my shoes. As we landed and taxied toward the ramp everybody was reaching for overcoats, gloves, hats, mufflers. I let them all get off and then climbed down the portable stairway. There was Frenchy leaning against a building and waiting. Frenchy taught drama and collected books, mostly mine. "Welcome to Kansas Shitty, Chinaski!" he said and handed me a bottle of tequila. I took a good gulp and followed him into the parking lot. I had no baggage, just a portfolio full of poems. The car was warm and pleasant and we passed the bottle.

The roadways were frozen over with ice.

"Not everybody can drive on this fucking kind of ice," said Frenchy. "You got to know what you're doing."

I opened the portfolio and began reading Frenchy a love poem Lydia had handed me at the airport:

"… your purple cock curved like a …

"… when I squeeze your pimples, bullets of puss like sperm …"

"Oh SHIT!" hollered Frenchy. The car went into a spin. Frenchy worked at the steering wheel.

"Frenchy," I said, lifting the tequila bottle and taking a hit, "we're not going to make it."

We spun off the road and into a three foot ditch which divided the highway. I handed him the bottle.

We got out of the car and climbed out of the ditch. We thumbed passing cars, sharing what was left of the bottle. Finally a car stopped. A man in his mid-twenties, drunk, was at the wheel. "Where you fellows going?"

"A poetry reading," said Frenchy.

"A poetry reading?"

"Yeah, at the University."

"All right, get in."

He was a liquor salesman. The back seat of his car was packed with cases of beer.

"Have a beer," he said, "and get me one too."

He got us there. We drove right up into the campus center and parked on the lawn in front of the auditorium. We were only 15 minutes late. I got out, vomited, then we all walked in together. We had stopped for a pint of vodka to get me through the reading.

I read about 20 minutes, then put the poems down. "This shit bores me," I said, "let's talk to each other."

I ended up screaming things at the audience and they screamed back at me. That audience wasn't bad. They were doing it for free. After about another 30 minutes a couple of professors got me out of there. "We've got a room for you, Chinaski," one of them said, "in the women's dormitory."

"In the women's dorm?"

"That's right, a nice room."

… It was true. Up on the third floor. One of the profs had brought a fifth of whiskey. Another gave me a check for the reading, plus air fare, and we sat around and drank the whiskey and talked. I blacked out. When I came to everybody was gone and there was half a fifth left. I sat there drinking and thinking, hey, you're Chinaski, Chinaski the legend. You've got an image. Now you're in the women's dorm. Hundreds of women in this place, hundreds of them.

All I had on were my shorts and stockings. I walked out into the hall up to the nearest door. I knocked.

"Hey, I'm Henry Chinaski, the immortal writer! Open up! I wanna show you something!"

I heard the girls giggling.

"O.K. now," I said, "how many of you are in there? 2? 3? It doesn't matter. I can handle 3! No problem! Hear me? Open up! I have this HUGE purple thing! Listen, I'll beat on the door with it!"

I took my fist and beat on the door. They kept giggling.

"So. You're not going to let Chinaski in, eh? Well, FUCK YOU!"

I tried the next door. "Hey, girls! This is the best poet of the last 18 hundred years! Open the door! I'm gonna show you something! Sweet meat for your vaginal lips!"

I tried the next door.

I tried all the doors on that floor and then I walked down the stairway and worked all the doors on the second floor and then all the doors on the first. I had the whiskey with me and I got tired. It seemed like hours since I had left my room. I drank as I walked along. No luck.

I had forgotten where my room was, which floor it was on. All I wanted, finally, was to get back to my room. I tried all the doors again, this time silently, very conscious of my shorts and stockings. No luck. "The greatest men are the most alone."

Back on the third floor I twisted a doorknob and the door opened. There was my portfolio of poems … the empty drinking glasses, ashtrays full of cigarette stubs … my pants, my shirt, my shoes, my coat. It was a wonderful sight. I closed the door, sat down on the bed and finished the bottle of whiskey that I had been carrying with me.

I awakened. It was daylight. I was in a strange clean place with two beds, drapes, t.v., bath. It appeared to be a motel room. I got up and opened the door. There was snow and ice out there. I closed the door and looked around. There was no explanation. I had no idea where I was. I was terribly hung over and depressed. I reached for the telephone and placed a long distance call to Lydia in Los Angeles.

"Baby, I don't know where I am!"

"I thought you went to Kansas City?"

"I did. But now I don't know where I am, you understand? I opened the door and looked and there's nothing but frozen roads, ice, snow!"

"Where were you staying?"

"Last thing I remember I had a room in the women's dorm."

"Well, you probably made an ass out of yourself and they moved you to a motel. Don't worry. Somebody will show up to take care of you."

"Christ, don't you have any sympathy for my situation?"

"You made an ass out of yourself. You generally always make an ass out of yourself."

"What do you mean 'generally always'?"

"You're just a lousy drunk," Lydia said. "Take a warm shower."

She hung up.

I walked over to the bed and stretched out. It was a nice motel room but it lacked character. I'd be damned if I'd take a shower. I thought of turning on the t.v.

I slept finally… .

There was a knock on the door. Two bright young college boys stood there, ready to take me to the airport. I sat on the edge of the bed putting on my shoes. "We got time for a couple at the airport bar before take-off?" I asked.

"Sure, Mr. Chinaski," one of them said, "anything you want." "O.K." I said. "Then let's get the fuck out of here."

8

I got back, made love to Lydia several times, got in a fight with her, and left L. A. International late one morning to give a reading in Arkansas. I was lucky enough to have a seat by myself. The flight captain announced himself, if I heard correctly, as Captain Winehead. When the stewardess came by I ordered a drink.

I was certain I knew one of the stewardesses. She lived in Long Beach, had read some of my books, had written me a letter enclosing her photo and phone number. I recognized her from the photo. I had never gotten around to meeting her but I called her a number of times and one drunken night we had screamed at each other over the phone.

She stood up front trying not to notice me as I stared at her behind and her calves and her breasts.

We had lunch, saw the Game of the Week, the after-lunch wine burned my throat, and I ordered two Bloody Marys.

When we got to Arkansas I transferred to a small two engine job. When the propellers started up the wings began to vibrate and shake. They looked like they might fall off. We lifted off and the stewardess asked if anybody wanted a drink. By then we all needed one. She staggered and wobbled up and down the aisle selling drinks. Then she said, loudly, “DRINK UP! WE’RE GOING TO LAND!” We drank up and landed. Fifteen minutes later we were up again. The stewardess asked if anybody wanted a drink. By then we all needed one. Then she said, loudly, “DRINK UP! WE’RE GOING TO LAND!”

Professor Peter James and his wife, Selma, were there to meet me. Selma looked like a movie starlet but with much more class.

“You’re looking great,” said Pete.

“Your wife’s looking great.”

“You’ve got two hours before the reading.”

Pete drove to their place. It was a split-level house with the guestroom on the lower level. I was shown my bedroom, downstairs. “You want to eat?” Pete asked. “No, I feel like I’m going to vomit.” We went upstairs.

Backstage, just before the reading, Pete filled a water pitcher with vodka and orange juice. “An old woman runs the readings. She’d cream in her panties if she knew you were drinking. She’s a nice old girl but she still thinks poetry is about sunsets and doves in flight.”

I went out and read. S.R.O. The luck was holding. They were like any other audience: they didn’t know how to handle some of the good poems, and during others they laughed at the wrong times. I kept reading and pouring from the water pitcher.

“What’s that you’re drinking?”

“This,” I said, “is orange juice mixed with life.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“I’m a virgin.”

“Why did you seek to become a writer?”

“Next question, please.”

I read some more. I told them I had flown in with Captain Winehead and had seen the Game of the Week. I told them that when I was in good spiritual shape I ate off one dish and then washed it immediately. I read some more poems. I read poems until the water pitcher was empty. Then I told them the reading was over. There was a bit of autographing and we went to a party at Pete’s house… .

I did my Indian dance, my Belly dance and my Broken-Ass-in-the-Wind dance. It’s hard to drink when you dance. And it’s hard to dance when you drink. Peter knew what he was doing. He had couches and chairs lined up to separate the dancers from the drinkers. Each could go their own way without bothering the other.

Pete walked up. He looked around the room at the women. “Which one do you want?” he asked.

“Is it that easy?”

"It's just southern hospitality."

There was one I had noticed, older than the others, with protruding teeth. But her teeth protruded perfectly—pushing the lips out like an open passionate flower. I wanted my mouth on that mouth. She wore a short skirt and her pantyhose revealed good legs that kept crossing and uncrossing as she laughed and drank and tugged at her skirt which would just not stay down. I sat next to her. "I'm—" I started to say… .

"I know who you are. I was at your reading."

"Thanks. I'd like to eat your pussy. I've gotten pretty good at it. I'll drive you crazy."

"What do you think of Allen Ginsberg?"

"Look, don't get me off the track. I want your mouth, your legs, your ass."

"All right," she said.

"See you soon. I'm in the bedroom downstairs."

I got up, left her, had another drink. A young guy—at least 6 feet 6 inches tall—walked up to me. "Look, Chinaski, I don't believe all that shit about you living on skidrow and knowing all the dope dealers, pimps, whores, junkies, horse players, fighters and drunks. …"

"It's partly true."

"Bullshit," he said and walked off. A literary critic.

Then this blonde, about 19, with rimless glasses and a smile walked up. The smile never left. "I want to fuck you," she said. "It's your face."

"What about my face?"

"It's magnificent. I want to destroy your face with my cunt."

"It might be the other way around."

"Don't bet on it."

"You're right. Cunts are indestructible."

I went back to the couch and started playing with the legs of the one with the short skirt and moist flower lips whose name was Lillian.

The party ended and I went downstairs with Lilly. We undressed and sat propped against the pillows drinking vodka and vodka mix. There was a radio and the radio played. Lilly told me that she had worked for years to put her husband through college and then when he had gotten his professorship he had divorced her.

“That’s shaggy,” I said.

“You been married?”

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“‘Mental cruelty,’ according to the divorce papers.”

“Was it true?” she asked.

“Of course: both ways.”

I kissed Lilly. It was as good as I had imagined it would be. The flower mouth was open. We clasped, I sucked on her teeth. We broke.

“I think you,” she said, looking at me with wide and beautiful eyes, “are one of the two or three best writers of today.”

I switched off the bed lamp fast. I kissed her some more, played with her breasts and body, then went down on her. I was drunk, but I think I did O.K. But after that I couldn’t do it the other way. I rode and rode and rode. I was hard but I couldn’t come. Finally I rolled off and went to sleep… .

In the morning Lilly was flat on her back, snoring. I went to the bathroom, pissed, brushed my teeth and washed my face. Then I crawled back into bed. I turned her toward me and started playing with her parts. I am always very horny when hungover—not horny to eat but horny to blast. Fucking was the best cure for hangovers. It got all the parts ticking again. Her breath was so bad that I didn’t want the flower mouth. I mounted. She gave a small groan. For me, it was very good. I don’t think I gave her more than twenty strokes before I came.

After a while I heard her get up and walk to the bathroom. Lillian. By the time she came back I had turned my back to her and was nearly asleep.

After 15 minutes she got out of bed and began to dress.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I’ve got to get out of here. I’ve got to take my kids to school.”

Lillian closed the door and ran up the stairway.

I got up, walked to the bathroom, and stared for a while at my face in the mirror.

At ten am I went upstairs for breakfast. I found Pete and Selma. Selma looked great. How did one get a Selma? The dogs of this world never ended up with a Selma. Dogs ended up with dogs. Selma served us breakfast. She was beautiful and one man owned her, a college professor. That was not quite right, somehow. Educated hotshot smoothies. Education was the new god, and educated men the new plantation masters.

“It was a damned good breakfast,” I told them. “Thanks much.”

“How was Lilly?” Pete asked.

“Lilly was very good.”

“You’ve got to read again tonight, you know. It’ll be at a smaller college, more conservative.

“All right. I’ll be careful.”

“What are you going to read?”

“Old stuff, I guess.”

We finished our coffee and walked into the front room and sat down. The phone rang, Pete answered, talked, then turned to me. “Guy from the local paper wants to interview you. What’ll I tell him?”

“Tell him all right.”

Pete relayed the answer, then walked over and picked up my latest book and a pen. “I thought you might want to write something in this for Lilly.”

I opened the book to the title page. “Dear Lilly,” I wrote. “You will always be part of my life! …

Henry Chinaski.”

9

Lydia and I were always fighting. She was a flirt and it irritated me. When we ate out I was sure she was eyeballing some man across the room. When my male friends came by to visit and Lydia was there I could hear her conversation become intimate and sexual. She always sat very close to my friends, positioning herself as near them as possible. It was my drinking that irritated Lydia. She loved sex and my drinking got in the way of our lovemaking. “Either you’re too drunk to do it at night or too sick to do it in the morning,” she’d say. Lydia would go into a rage if I even drank a bottle of beer in front of her. We split up at least once a week— “Forever”—but always managed to make up, somehow. She had finished sculpting my head and had given it to me. When we’d split I’d put the head in my car next to me on the front seat, drive it over to her place and leave it outside her door on the porch. Then I’d go to a phone booth, ring hervup and say, “Your goddamned head is outside the door!” That head went back and forth… .

We had just split again and I had dropped off the head. I was drinking, a free man again. I had a young friend, Bobby, a rather bland kid who worked in a porno bookstore and was a photographer on the side. He lived a couple of blocks away. Bobby was having trouble with himself and with his wife, Valerie. He phoned one evening and said he was bringing Valerie over to stay the night with me. It sounded fine. Valerie was 22, absolutely lovely, with long blond hair, mad blue eyes and a beautiful body. Like Lydia, she had also spent some time in a madhouse. After a while I heard them drive up on the lawn in front of my court. Valerie got out. I remembered Bobby telling me that when he first introduced Valerie to his parents they had commented on her dress—that they liked it very much—and she had said, “Yeah, well how about the rest of me?" She had pulled her dress up over her hips. And didn't have any panties on.

Valerie knocked. I heard Bobby drive off. I let her in. She looked fine. I poured two scotch and waters. Neither of us spoke. We drank those and I poured two more. After that I said, "Come on, let's make a bar." We got into my car. The Glue Machine was right around the corner. I had been 86'd earlier that week but nothing was said when we walked in. We got a table and ordered drinks. We still didn't talk. I just looked into those mad blue eyes. We were sitting side by side and I kissed her. Her mouth was cool and open. I kissed her again and our legs pressed together. Bobby had a nice wife. Bobby was crazy to pass her around.

We decided on dinner. We each ordered a steak and we drank and we kissed while we waited. The barmaid said, "Oh, you're in love!" and we both laughed. When the steaks came Valerie said, "I don't want to eat mine." "I don't want to eat mine either," I said.

We drank for another hour and then decided to go back to my place. As I drove the car up on the front lawn I saw a woman in the driveway. It was Lydia. She had an envelope in her hand. I got out of the car with Valerie and Lydia looked at us. "Who's that?" asked Valerie. "The woman I love," I told her.

"Who's the bitch?" screamed Lydia.

Valerie turned and ran down the sidewalk. I could hear her high heels on the pavement. "Come on in," I told Lydia. She followed me in.

"I came here to give this letter to you and it looks like I came at the right time. Who was she?"

"Bobby's wife. We're just friends."

"You were going to fuck her, weren't you?"

"Now look, I told her I love you."

"You were going to fuck her, weren't you?"

"Now look, baby …"

Suddenly she shoved me. I was standing in front of the coffee table which was in front of the couch. I fell backward over the coffee table and into the space between the table and the couch. I heard the door slam. And as I got up I heard the engine of Lydia's car start. Then she drove off.

Son-of-a-bitch, I thought, one minute I've got two women and the next I've got none.

10

I was surprised the next morning when April knocked on the door. April was the one on ATD who had been at Harry Ascot's party and who had left with the speed freak. It was 11 am. April came in and sat down.

"I've always admired your work," she said.

I got her a beer and got myself a beer.

"God is a hook in the sky," she said.

"All right," I said.

April was on the heavy side but not too fat. She had big hips and a large ass and her hair fell straight down. There was something about the size of her—rugged, like she could handle an ape. Her mental deficiency was attractive to me because she didn't play games. She crossed her legs, showing me enormous white flanks.

"I planted tomato seeds down in the basement of the apartment house I live in," she said.

"I'll take some when they come up," I said.

"I've never had a driver's license," April said. "My mother lives in New Jersey."

"My mother's dead," I said. I walked over and sat next to her on the couch. I grabbed her and kissed her. While I was kissing her she looked right into my eyes. I broke off. "Let's fuck," I said.

"I have an infection," said April.

"What?"

"It's sort of a fungus. Nothing serious."

"Could I catch it?"

"It's kind of a milky discharge."

"Could I catch it?"

"I don't think so."

"Let's fuck."

"I don't know if I want to fuck."

"It'll feel good. Let's go into the bedroom."

April walked into the bedroom and started taking off her clothes. I took mine off. We got under the sheets. I began playing with her parts and kissing her. I mounted her. It was very strange. As if her cunt ran from side to side. I knew I was in there, it felt like I was in there, but I kept slipping sideways, to the left. I kept humping. It was exciting like that. I finished and rolled off.

Later I drove her to her apartment and we went up. We talked for a long while and I left only after making note of the apartment number and the address. As I walked through the lobby I recognized the apartment house lock boxes. I had delivered mail there many times as a mailman. I went out to my car and drove off.

11

Lydia had two children; Tonto, a boy of 8, and Lisa, the little girl of 5 who had interrupted our first fuck. We were together at the table one night eating dinner. Things were going well between Lydia and me and I stayed for dinner almost every night, then slept with Lydia and left about 11 am the next morning to go back to my place to check the mail and write. The children slept in the next room on a waterbed. It was an old, small house which Lydia rented from an ex-Japanese wrestler now into real estate. He was obviously interested in Lydia. That was all right. It was a nice old house.

"Tonto," I said as we were eating, "you know that when your mother screams at night I'm not beating her. You know who's really in trouble."

"Yes, I know."

"Then why don't you come in and help me?"

"Uh-uh. I know her."

"Listen, Hank," said Lydia, "don't turn my kids against me."

"He's the ugliest man in the world," said Lisa.

I liked Lisa. She was going to be a sexpot some day, a sexpot with personality.

After dinner Lydia and I went to our bedroom and stretched out. Lydia was into blackheads and pimples. I had a bad complexion. She moved the lamp down near my face and began. I liked it.

It made me tingle and sometimes I got a hard-on. Very intimate. Sometimes between squeezes Lydia would give me a kiss. She always worked on my face first and then moved on to my back and chest.

"You love me?"

"Yeh."

"Oooh, look at this one!"

It was a blackhead with a long yellow tail.

"It's nice," I said.

She was laying flat on top of me. She stopped squeezing and looked at me. "I'll put you in your grave, you fat fuck!"

I laughed. Then Lydia kissed me.

"I'll put you back in the madhouse," I told her.

"Turn over. Let me get your back."

I turned over. She squeezed at the back of my neck. "Oooh, there's a good one! It shot out! It hit me in the eye!"

"You ought to wear goggles."

"Let's have a little Henry!" "Think of it, a little Henry Chinaski!"

"Let's wait a while."

"I want a baby now!"

"Let's wait."

"All we do is sleep and eat and lay around and make love. We're like slugs. Slug-love, I call it."

"I like it."

"You used to write over here. You were busy. You'd bring ink and make your drawings. Now you go home and do all the interesting things there. You just eat and sleep here and then leave first thing in the morning. It's dull."

"I like it."

"We haven't been to a party in months! I like to see people! I'm bored! I'm so bored I'm about to go crazy! I want to do things! I want to DANCE! I want to, live!"

"Oh, shit."

"You're too old. You just want to sit around and criticize everything and everybody. You don't want to do anything. Nothing's good enough for you!"

I rolled out of bed and stood up. I began putting my shirt on.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm getting out of here."

"There you go! The minute things don't go your way you jump up and run out of the door. You never want to talk about things. You go home and get drunk and then you're so sick the next day you think you're going to die. Then you phone me!"

"I'm getting the hell out of here!"

"But why?"

"I don't want to stay where I'm not wanted. I don't want to stay where I'm disliked."

Lydia waited. Then she said, "All right. Come on, lay down. We'll turn off the light and just be still together."

I waited. Then I said, "Well, all right."

I undressed entirely and got under the blanket and sheet. I pressed my flank against Lydia's flank. We were both on our backs. I could hear the crickets. It was a nice neighborhood. A few minutes passed. Then Lydia said, "I'm going to be great."

I didn't answer. A few more minutes passed. Then Lydia leaped out of bed. She threw both of her hands up in the air toward the ceiling and said in a loud voice: "I'M GOING TO BE GREAT! I'M GOING TO BE TRULY GREAT! NOBODY KNOWS HOW GREAT I'M GOING TO BE!"

"All right," I said.

Then she said in a lower voice, "You don't understand. I'm going to be great. I have more potential than you have!"

"Potential," I said, "doesn't mean a thing. You've got to do it. Almost every baby in a crib has more potential than I have."

"But I'm GOING to do it! I'M GOING TO BE TRULY GREAT!"

"All right," I said. "But meanwhile come on back to bed."

Lydia came back to bed. We didn't kiss each other. We weren't going to have sex. I felt weary. I listened to the crickets. I don't know how much time went by. I was almost asleep, not quite, when Lydia suddenly sat straight up in bed. And she screamed. It was a loud scream.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Be quiet."

I waited. Lydia sat there, without moving, for what seemed to be about ten minutes. Then she fell back on her pillow.

"I saw God," she said, "I just saw God."

"Listen, you bitch, you are going to drive me crazy!"

I got up and began dressing. I was mad. I couldn't find my shorts. The hell with them, I thought. I left them wherever they were. I had all my clothes on and was sitting on the chair pulling my shoes on my bare feet.

"What are you doing?" Lydia asked.

I couldn't answer. I went into the front room. My coat was flung over a chair and I picked it up, put it on. Lydia ran into the front room. She had put on her blue negligee and a pair of panties. She was barefooted. Lydia had thick ankles. She usually wore boots to hide them.

"YOU'RE NOT GOING!" she screamed at me.

"Shit," I said, "I'm getting out of here."

She leaped at me. She usually attacked me while I was drunk. Now I was sober. I sidestepped and she fell to the floor, rolled over and was on her back. I stepped over her on my way to the front door. She was in a spitting rage, snarling, her lips pulled back. She was like a leopardess. I looked down at her. I felt safe with her on the floor. She let out a snarl and as I started to leave she reached up and dug her nails into the sleeve of my coat, pulled and ripped the sleeve off my arm. It was ripped from the coat at the shoulder.

"Jesus Christ," I said, "look what you've done to my new coat! I just bought it!"

I opened the door and jumped outside with one bare arm.

I had just unlocked the door to my car when I heard her bare feet on the asphalt behind me. I leaped in and locked the door. I punched the starter.

"I'll kill this car!" she screamed. "I'll kill this car!"

Her fists beat on the hood, on the roof, against the windshield. I moved the car ahead very slowly so as not to injure her. My '62 Mercury Comet had fallen apart, and I'd recently purchased a '67 Volks. I kept it shined and waxed. I even had a whisk broom in the glove compartment. As I pulled away Lydia kept beating on the car with her fists. When I was clear of her I shoved it into second. I looked in the rear view mirror and saw her standing all alone in the moonlight, motionless in her blue negligee and panties. My gut began to twitch and roll. I felt ill, useless, sad. I was in love with her.

12

I went to my place, started drinking. I snapped on the radio and found some classical music. I got my Coleman lantern out of the closet. I turned out the lights and sat playing with the Coleman lantern. There were tricks you could play with a Coleman lantern. Like turning it off and then on again and watching the heat of the wick relight it. I also liked to pump the lantern and bring up the pressure. And then there was simply the pleasure of looking at it. I drank and watched the lantern and listened to the music and smoked a cigar.

The phone rang. It was Lydia. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“Just sitting around.”

“You’re sitting around and drinking and listening to symphony music and playing with that goddamned Coleman lantern!”

“Yes.”

“Are you coming back?”

“No.”

“All right, drink! Drink and get sick! You know that stuff almost killed you once. Do you remember the hospital?”

“I’ll never forget it.”

“All right, drink, DRINK! KILL YOURSELF! SEE IF I GIVE A SHIT!”

Lydia hung up and so did I. Something told me she wasn’t as worried about my possible death as she was about her next fuck. But I needed a vacation. I needed a rest. Lydia liked to fuck at least five times a week. I preferred three. I got up and went into the breakfast nook where my typewriter stood on the table. I turned on the light, sat down and typed Lydia a 4-page letter. Then I went into the bathroom, got a razorblade, came out, sat down and had a good drink. I took the razorblade and sliced the middle finger of my right hand. The blood ran. I signed my name to the letter in blood.

I went down to the corner mailbox and dropped the letter in.

The phone rang several times. It was Lydia. She screamed things at me.

"I'm going out DANCING! I'm not going to sit around alone while you drink!"

I told her, "You act like drinking is like my going with another woman."

"It's worse!"

She hung up.

I kept drinking. I didn't feel like sleeping. Soon it was midnight, then 1 am, 2 am. The Coleman lantern burned on… .

At 3:30 am the phone rang. Lydia again. "Are you still drinking?"

"Sure!"

"You rotten son of a bitch!"

"In fact just as you called I was peeling the cellophane off this pint of Cutty Sark. It's beautiful. You ought to see it!"

She slammed down the phone. I mixed another drink. There was good music on the radio. I leaned back. I felt very good.

The door banged open and Lydia ran into the room. She stood there panting. The pint was on the coffee table. She saw it and grabbed it. I jumped up and grabbed her. When I was drunk and Lydia was insane we were nearly an equal match. She held the bottle high in the air, away from me, and tried to get out of the door with it. I grabbed the arm that held the bottle, and tried to get it away from her.

"YOU WHORE! YOU HAVE NO RIGHT! GIVE ME THAT FUCKING BOTTLE!"

Then we were out on the porch, wrestling. We tripped on the stairs and fell to the pavement. The bottle smashed and broke on the cement. She got up and ran off. I heard her car start. I lay there and looked at the broken bottle. It was a foot away. Lydia drove off. The moon was still up. In the bottom of what was left of the bottle I could see a swallow of scotch. Stretched out there on the pavement I reached for it and lifted it to my mouth. A long shard of glass almost poked into one of my eyes as I drank what remained. Then I got up and went inside. The thirst in me was terrible. I walked around picking up beer bottles and drinking the bit that remained in each one. Once I got a mouthful of ashes as I often used beer bottles for ashtrays. It was 4:14 am. I sat and watched the clock. It was like working in the post office again. Time was motionless while existence was a throbbing unbearable thing. I waited. I waited. I waited. I waited. Finally it was 6 am. I walked to the corner to the liquor store. A clerk was opening up. He let me in. I purchased another pint of Cutty Sark. I walked back home, locked the door and phoned Lydia.

"I have here one pint of Cutty Sark from which I am peeling the cellophane. I am going to have a drink. And the liquor store will now be open for 20 hours."

She hung up. I had one drink and then walked into the bedroom, stretched out on the bed, and went to sleep without taking off my clothes.

13

A week later I was driving down Hollywood Boulevard with Lydia. A weekly entertainment newspaper published in California at that time had asked me to write an article on the life of the writer in Los Angeles. I had written it and was driving over to the editorial offices to submit it. We parked in the lot at Mosley Square. Mosley Square was a section of expensive bungalows used as offices by music publishers, agents, promoters and the like. The rents were very high.

We went into one of the bungalows. There was a handsome girl behind the desk, educated and cool.

"I'm Chinaski," I said, "and here's my copy."

I threw it on the desk.

"Oh, Mr. Chinaski, I've always admired your work very much!"

"Do you have anything to drink around here?"

"Just a moment… ."

She went up to a carpeted stairway and came back down with a bottle of expensive red wine. She opened it and pulled some glasses from a hidden bar. How I'd like to get in bed with her, I thought. But there was no way. Yet, somebody was going to bed with her regularly.

We sat and sipped our wine.

"We'll let you know very soon about the article. I'm sure we'll take it… . But you're not at all the way I expected you to be… ."

"What do you mean?"

"Your voice is so soft. You seem so nice."

Lydia laughed. We finished our wine and left. As we were walking toward my car I heard a voice. "Hank!"

I looked around and there sitting in a new Mercedes was Dee Dee Bronson. I walked over.

"How's it going, Dee Dee?"

"Pretty good. I quit Capitol Records. Now I'm running that place over there." She pointed. It was another music company, quite famous, with its home office in London. Dee Dee used to drop by my place with her boyfriend when he and I both had columns in a Los Angeles underground newspaper.

"Jesus, you're doing good," I said.

"Yes, except …"

"Except what?"

"Except I need a man. A good man."

"Well, give me your phone number and I'll see if I can find one for you."

"All right."

Dee Dee wrote her phone number on a slip of paper and I put it in my wallet. Lydia and I walked over to my old Volks and got in. "You're going to phone her," Lydia said. "You're going to use that number."

I started the car and got back on Hollywood Boulevard.

"You're going to use that number," she said. "I just know you're going to use that number!"

"Cut the shit!" I said.

It looked like another bad night.

14

We had another fight. Later I was back at my place but I didn't feel like sitting there alone and drinking. The night harness racing meet was on. I took a pint and went out to the track. I arrived early and got all my figures together. By the time the first race was over the pint was surprisingly more than half gone. I was mixing it with hot coffee and it went down easily.

I won three of the first four races. Later I won an exacta and was nearly $200 ahead by the end of the 5th race. I went to the bar and played off the toteboard. That night they gave me what I called "a good toteboard." Lydia would have shit if she could have seen me pulling in all that cash. She hated it when I won at the track, especially when she was losing.

I kept drinking and hitting. By the time the 9th race was over I was $950 ahead and very drunk. I put my wallet in one of my side pockets and walked slowly to my car.

I sat in my car and watched the losers leave the parking lot. I sat there until the traffic thinned out then I started the engine. Just outside the track was a supermarket. I saw a lighted phone booth at one end of the parking lot, drove in and got out. I walked to the phone and dialed Lydia's number.

"Listen," I said, "listen, you bitch, I went to the harness races tonight and won $950. I'm a winner! I'll always be a winner! You don't deserve me, bitch! You've been playing with me! Well, it's over! I want out! This is it! I don't need you and your goddamned games! Do you understand me? Do you get the message? Or is your head thicker than your ankles?"

"Hank …"

"Yes?"

"This isn't Lydia. This is Bonnie. I'm baby sitting for Lydia. She went out tonight."

I hung up and walked back to my car.

15

Lydia phoned me in the morning. “Whenever you get drunk,” she said, “I’m going out dancing. I went to the Red Umbrella last night and I asked men to dance with me. A woman has a right to do that.”

“You’re a whore.”

“Yeah? Well, if there’s anything worse than a whore it’s a bore.”

“If there’s anything worse than a bore it’s a boring whore.”

“If you don’t want my pussy,” she said, “I’ll give it to somebody else.”

“That’s your privilege.”

“After I finished dancing, I went to see Marvin. I wanted to get his girlfriend’s address and go see her. Francine. You went to see his girl Francine one night yourself,” Lydia said.

“Look, I never fucked her. I was just too drunk to drive home after a party. We didn’t even kiss. She let me sleep on her couch and I went home in the morning.”

“Anyhow, after I got to Marvin’s, I decided not to ask for Francine’s address.”

Marvin’s parents had money. He had a house down by the seashore. Marvin wrote poetry, better poetry than most. I liked Marvin.

“Well, I hope you had a good time,” I said and hung up.

I had no sooner hung up when the phone rang again. It was Marvin. “Hey, guess who came by real late last night? Lydia. She knocked on the window and I let her in. She gave me a hard-on.”

“O.K., Marvin. I understand. I’m not blaming you.”

“You’re not pissed?”

“Not at you.”

“All right then …”

I took the sculpted head and loaded it into my car. I drove over to Lydia's and put the head on her doorstep. I didn't ring the bell. I started to walk away. Lydia came out.

"Why are you such an ass?" she asked.

I turned. "You are not selective. One man's the same as another to you. I'm not going to eat your shit."

"I'm not going to eat your shit either!" she screamed and slammed the door.

I walked to my car, got in and started it. I put it in first. It didn't move. I tried second. Nothing. Then I went back to first. I checked to be sure the brake was off. It wouldn't move. I tried reverse. The car moved backwards. I braked and tried first again. The car wouldn't move. I was still very angry with Lydia. I thought, well, I'll drive the fucking thing home backwards. Then I thought about the cops stopping me and asking me what the hell I was doing. Well, officers, I had a fight with my girl and this was the only way I could get home.

I didn't feel so angry with Lydia anymore. I climbed out and went to her door. She had taken my head inside. I knocked.

Lydia opened the door. "Look," I asked, "are you some kind of witch?"

"No, I'm a whore, remember?"

"You've got to drive me home. My car will only run backwards. The goddamned thing is hexed."

"Are you serious?"

"Come on, I'll show you."

Lydia followed me out to the car. "The gears have been working fine. Then all of a sudden the car will only run backwards. I was going to drive it home that way."

I got in. "Now watch."

I started the car and put it in first, let out the clutch. It jumped forward. I put it in second. It went into second and moved faster. I put it into third. It moved nicely forward. I made a U-turn and parked on the other side of the street. Lydia walked over.

“Listen,” I said, “you’ve got to believe me. A minute ago the car would only run backwards. Now it’s all right. Please believe me.”

“I believe you,” she said. “God did it. I believe in that sort of thing.”

“It must mean something.”

“It does.”

I got out of the car. We walked into her house.

“Take off your shirt and shoes,” she said, “and lay down on the bed. First I want to squeeze your blackheads.”

16

The ex-Japanese wrestler who was into real estate sold Lydia's house. She had to move out. There was Lydia, Tonto, Lisa and the dog, Bugbutt. In Los Angeles most landlords hang out the same sign: ADULTS ONLY. With two children and a dog it was very difficult. Only Lydia's good looks could help her. A male landlord was needed.

I drove them all around town. It was useless. Then I stayed out of sight in the car. It still didn't work. As we drove along Lydia screamed out the window, "Isn't there anybody in this town who will rent to a woman with two kids and a dog?"

Unexpectedly a vacancy occurred in my court. I saw the people moving out and I went right down and talked to Mrs. O'Keefe.

"Listen," I said, "my girlfriend needs a place to live. She has two kids and a dog but they're all well-behaved. Will you let them move in?"

"I've seen that woman," said Mrs. O'Keefe. "Haven't you noticed her eyes? She's crazy."

"I know she's crazy. But I care for her. She has some good qualities, really."

"She's too young for you! What are you going to do with a young woman like that?"

I laughed.

Mr. O'Keefe walked up behind his wife. He looked at me through the screen door. "He's pussy-whipped, that's all. It's quite simple, he's pussy-whipped."

"How about it?" I asked.

"All right," said Mrs. O'Keefe. "Move her in… ."

So Lydia rented a U-Haul and I moved her in. It was mostly clothes, all the heads she had sculpted, and a large washing machine.

“I don’t like Mrs. O’Keefe,” she told me. “Her husband looks all right, but I don’t like her.”

“She’s a good Catholic sort. And you need a place to live.”

“I don’t want you drinking with those people. They’re out to destroy you.”

“I’m only paying 85 bucks a month rent. They treat me like a son. I have to have a beer with them now and then.”

“Son, shit! You’re almost as old as they are.”

About three weeks passed. It was late one Saturday morning. I had not slept at Lydia’s the night before. I bathed and had a beer, got dressed. I disliked weekends. Everybody was out on the streets. Everybody was playing PingPong or mowing their lawn or polishing their car or going to the supermarket or the beach or to the park. Crowds everywhere. Monday was my favorite day. Everybody was back on the job and out of sight. I decided to go to the racetrack despite the crowd. That would help kill Saturday. I ate a hard-boiled egg, had another beer and stepping out on my porch, locked the door. Lydia was outside playing with Bugbutt, the dog.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m going to the track.”

Lydia walked over to me. “Listen, you know what the racetrack does to you.”

She meant that I was always too tired to make love after going to the racetrack.

“You were drunk last night,” she continued. “You were horrible. You frightened Lisa. I had to run you out.”

“I’m going to the racetrack.”

“All right, you go ahead and go to the racetrack. But if you do I won’t be here when you get back.”

I got into my car which was parked on the front lawn. I rolled down the windows and started the motor. Lydia was standing in the driveway. I waved goodbye to her and pulled out into the street. It was a nice summer day. I drove down to Hollywood Park. I had a new system. Each new system brought me closer and closer to wealth. It was simply a matter of time.

I lost $40 and drove home. I parked my car on the lawn and got out. As I walked around the porch to my door Mr. O'Keefe walked up the driveway. "She's gone!"

"What?"

"Your girl. She moved out."

I didn't answer.

"She rented a U-Haul and loaded her stuff in it. She was mad. You know that big washing machine?"

"Yes."

"Well, that thing's heavy. I couldn't lift it. She wouldn't let the boy help her. She just lifted the thing and put it in the U-Haul. Then she got the kids, the dog, and drove off. She had a week's rent left."

"All right, Mr. O'Keefe. Thanks."

"You coming down to drink tonight?"

"I don't know."

"Try to make it."

I unlocked the door and went inside. I had lent her an air-conditioner. It was sitting in a chair outside of the closet. There was a note on it and a pair of blue panties. The note was in a wild scrawl: "Bastard, here is your air-conditioner. I am gone. I am gone for good, you son-of-a-bitch! When you get lonely you can use these panties to jack-off into. Lydia."

I went to the refrigerator and got a beer. I drank the beer and then walked over to the air-conditioner. I picked up the panties and stood there wondering if it would work. Then I said, "Shit!" and threw them on the floor.

I went to the phone and dialed Dee Dee Bronson. She was in. "Hello?" she said.

"Dee Dee," I said, "this is Hank… ."

I7

Dee Dee had a place in the Hollywood Hills. Dee Dee shared the place with a friend, another lady executive, Bianca. Bianca took the top floor and Dee Dee the bottom. I rang the bell. It was 8:30 pm when Dee Dee opened the door. Dee Dee was about 40, had black, cropped hair, was Jewish, hip, freaky. She was New York City oriented, knew all the names: the right publishers, the best poets, the most talented cartoonists, the right revolutionaries, anybody, everybody. She smoked grass continually and acted like it was the early 1960's and Love-In Time, when she had been mildly famous and much more beautiful.

A long series of bad love affairs had finally done her in. Now I was standing at her door. There was a good deal left of her body. She was small but buxom and many a young girl would have loved to have her figure.

I followed her in. "So Lydia split?" Dee Dee asked.

"I think she went to Utah. The 4th of July dance in Muleshead is coming up. She never misses it."

I sat down in the breakfast nook while Dee Dee uncorked a red wine. "Do you miss her?"

"Christ, yes. I feel like crying. My whole gut is chewed up. I might not make it."

"You'll make it. We'll get you over Lydia. We'll pull you through."

"Then you know how I feel?"

"It has happened to most of us a few times."

"That bitch never cared to begin with."

"Yes, she did. She still does."

I decided it was better to be there in Dee Dee's large home in the Hollywood Hills than to be sitting all alone back in my apartment and brooding.

"It must be that I'm just not good with the ladies," I said.

"You're good enough with the ladies," Dee Dee said. "And you're a helluva writer."

"I'd rather be good with the ladies."

Dee Dee was lighting a cigarette. I waited until she was finished, then I leaned across the table and gave her a kiss. "You make me feel good. Lydia was always on the attack."

"That doesn't mean what you think it means."

"But it can get to be unpleasant."

"It sure as hell can."

"Have you found a boyfriend yet?"

"Not yet."

"I like this place. But how do you keep it so neat and clean?"

"We have a maid."

"Oh?"

"You'll like her. She's big and black and she finishes her work as fast as she can after I leave. Then she goes to bed and eats cookies and watches t.v. I find cookie crumbs in my bed every night. I'll have her fix you breakfast after I leave tomorrow morning."

"All right."

"No, wait. Tomorrow's Sunday. I don't work Sundays. We'll eat out. I know a place. You'll like it."

"All right."

"You know, I think I've always been in love with you."

"What?"

"For years. You know, when I used to come and see you, first with Bernie and later with Jack, I would want you. But you never noticed me. You were always sucking on a can of beer or you were obsessed with something."

"Crazy, I guess, near crazy. Postal Service madness. I'm sorry I didn't notice you."

"You can notice me now."

Dee Dee poured another glass of wine. It was good wine. I liked her. It was good to have a place to go when things went bad. I remembered the early days when things would go bad and there wasn't anywhere to go. Maybe that had been good for me. Then. But now I wasn't interested in what was good for me. I was interested in how I felt and how to stop feeling bad when things went wrong. How to start feeling good again.

"I don't want to fuck you over, Dee Dee," I said. "I'm not always good to women."

"I told you I love you."

"Don't do it. Don't love me."

"All right," she said, "I won't love you, I'll almost love you. Will that be all right?"

"It's much better than the other."

We finished our wine and went to bed… .

18

In the morning Dee Dee drove me to the Sunset Strip for breakfast. The Mercedes was black and shone in the sun. We drove past the billboards and the nightclubs and the fancy restaurants. I slouched low in my seat, coughing over my cigarette. I thought, well, things have been worse. A scene or two flashed through my head. One winter in Atlanta I was freezing, it was midnight, I had no money, no place to sleep, and I walked up the steps of a church hoping to get inside and get warm. The church door was locked. Another time in El Paso, sleeping on a park bench, I was awakened in the morning by some cop smacking the soles of my shoes with his club. Still, I kept thinking about Lydia. The good parts of our relationship felt like a rat walking around and gnawing at the inside of my stomach.

Dee Dee parked outside a fancy eating place. There was a sun patio with chairs and tables where people sat eating, talking, and drinking coffee. We passed a black man in boots, jeans, and with a heavy silver chain coiled around his neck. His motorcycle helmet, goggles and gloves were on the table. He was with a thin blond girl in a peppermint jumpsuit who sat sucking on her little ringer. The place was crowded. Everybody looked young, scrubbed, bland. Nobody stared at us. Everybody was talking quietly.

We went inside and a pale slim boy with tiny buttocks, tight silver pants, an 8-inch studded belt and shiny gold blouse seated us. His ears were pierced and he wore tiny blue earrings. His pencil-thin mustache looked purple.

“Dee Dee,” he said, “what is happening?”

“Breakfast, Donny.”

“A drink, Donny,” I said.

“I know what he needs, Donny. Give him a Golden Flower, double.”

We ordered breakfast and Dee Dee said, “It will take a while to prepare. They cook everything to order here.”

“Don’t spend too much, Dee Dee.”

“It all goes on the expense account.”

She took out a little black book. “Now, let’s see. Who am I taking to breakfast? Elton John?”

“Isn’t he in Africa …”

“Oh, that’s right. Well, how about Cat Stevens?”

“Who’s that?”

“You don’t know?”

“No.”

“Well, I discovered him. You can be Cat Stevens.”

Donny brought the drink and he and Dee Dee talked. They seemed to know the same people. I didn’t know any of them. It took a lot to excite me. I didn’t care. I didn’t like New York. I didn’t like Hollywood. I didn’t like rock music. I didn’t like anything. Maybe I was afraid. That was it—I was afraid. I wanted to sit alone in a room with the shades down. I feasted upon that. I was a crank. I was a lunatic. And Lydia was gone.

I finished my drink and Dee Dee ordered another. I began to feel like a kept man and it felt great. It helped my blues. There is nothing worse than being broke and having your woman leave you. Nothing to drink, no job, just the walls, sitting there staring at the walls and thinking. That’s how women got back at you, but it hurt and weakened them too. Or so I like to believe.

The breakfast was good. Eggs garnished with various fruits … pineapple, peaches, pears … some grated nuts, seasoning. It was a good breakfast. We finished and Dee Dee ordered me another drink. The thought of Lydia still remained inside of me, but Dee Dee was nice. Her conversation was decisive and entertaining. She was able to make me laugh, which I needed. My laughter was all there inside of me waiting to roar out: HAHAHAHAHA, o my god o my HAHAHAHA. It felt so good when it happened. Dee Dee knew something about life. Dee Dee knew that what happened to one happened to most of us. Our lives were not so different—even though we liked to think so.

Pain is strange. A cat killing a bird, a car accident, a fire… . Pain arrives, BANG, and there it is, it sits on you. It's real. And to anybody watching, you look foolish. Like you've suddenly become an idiot. There's no cure for it unless you know somebody who understands how you feel, and knows how to help.

We went back to the car. "I know just where to take you to cheer you up," said Dee Dee. I didn't answer. I was being catered to as if I was an invalid. Which I was.

I asked Dee Dee to stop at a bar. One of hers. The bartender knew her.

"This," she told me as we entered, "is where a lot of the script writers hang out. And some of the little-theatre people."

I disliked them all immediately, sitting around acting clever and superior. They nullified each other. The worst thing for a writer is to know another writer, and worse than that, to know a number of other writers. Like flies on the same turd.

"Let's get a table," I said. So there I was, a $65 a week writer sitting in a room with other writers, $1000 a week writers. Lydia, I thought, I am getting there. You'll be sorry. Some day I'll go into fancy restaurants and I'll be recognized. They'll have a special table for me in the back near the kitchen.

We got our drinks and Dee Dee looked at me. "You give good head. You give the best head I ever had."

"Lydia taught me. Then I added a few touches of my own."

A dark young boy jumped up and came over to our table. Dee Dee introduced us. The boy was from New York, wrote for the Village Voice and other New York newspapers. He and Dee Dee name-dropped a while and then he asked her, "What's your husband do?"

"I got a stable," I said. "Fighters. Four good Mexican boys. Plus one black boy, a real dancer. What do you weigh?"

"158. Were you a fighter? Your face looks like you caught a few."

"I've caught a few. We can put you in at 135. I need a southpaw lightweight."

"How'd you know I was a southpaw?"

"You're holding your cigarette in your left hand. Come on down to the Main Street gym. Monday am. We'll start your training. Cigarettes are out. Put that son of a bitch out!"

"Listen, man, I'm a writer. I use a typewriter. You never read my stuff?"

"All I read is the metropolitan dailies—murders, rapes, fight results, swindles, jetliner crashes and Ann Landers."

"Dee Dee," he said, "I've got an interview with Rod Stewart in 30 minutes. I gotta go." He left.

Dee Dee ordered another round of drinks. "Why can't you be decent to people?" she asked.

"Fear," I said.

"Here we are," she said and drove her car into the Hollywood cemetery.

"Nice," I said, "real nice. I had forgotten all about death."

We drove around. Most of the tombs were above ground. They were like little houses, with pillars and front steps. And each had a locked iron door. Dee Dee parked and we got out. She tried one of the doors. I watched her behind wiggle as she worked at the door. I thought about Nietzsche. There we were: a German stallion and a Jewish mare. The Fatherland would adore me.

We got back into the M. Benz and Dee Dee parked outside of one of the bigger units. They were all stuck into the walls in there. Rows and rows of them. Some had flowers, in little vases, but most of the blooms were withered. The majority of the niches didn't have flowers. Some of them had husband and wife neatly side by side. In some cases one niche was empty and waiting. In all cases the husband was the one already dead.

Dee Dee took my hand and led me around the corner. There he was, down near the bottom, Rudolph Valentino. Dead 1926. Didn't live long. I decided to live to be 80. Think of being 80 and fucking an 18 year old girl. If there was any way to cheat the game of death, that was it.

Dee Dee lifted one of the flower vases and dropped it into her purse. The standard trip. Rip off whatever wasn't tied down. Everything belonged to everybody. We went outside and Dee Dee said, "I want to sit on Tyrone Power's bench. He was my favorite. I loved him!"

We went and sat on Tyrone's bench next to his grave. Then we got up and walked over to Douglas Fairbanks Sr.'s tomb. He had a good one. His own private reflector pool in front of the tomb. The pool was filled with water lillies and pollywogs. We walked up some stairs and there at the back of the tomb was a place to sit. Dee Dee and I sat. I noticed a crack in the wall of the tomb with small red ants running in and out. I watched the small red ants for a while, then put my arms around Dee Dee and kissed her, a good long long kiss. We were going to be good friends.

19

Dee Dee had to pick up her son at the airport. He was coming home from England for his vacation. He was 17, she told me, and his father was an ex-concert pianist. But he'd fallen for speed and coke, and later on burned his fingers in an accident. He could no longer play the piano. They'd been divorced for some time.

The son's name was Renny. Dee Dee had told him about me during several trans-Atlantic telephone conversations. We got to the airport as Renny's flight was disembarking. Dee Dee and Renny embraced. He was tall and thin, quite pale. A lock of hair hung over one eye. We shook hands.

I went to get the baggage while Renny and Dee Dee chatted. He addressed her as "Mommy." When we got back to the car he climbed into the back seat and said, "Mommy, did you get my bike?"

"I've ordered it. We'll pick it up tomorrow."

"Is it a good bike, Mommy? I want a ten-speed with a hand brake and pedal grips."

"It's a good bike, Kenny."

"Are you sure it will be ready?"

We drove back. I stayed overnight. Renny had his own bedroom.

In the morning we all sat in the breakfast nook together waiting for the maid to arrive. Dee Dee finally got up to fix breakfast for us. Renny said, "Mommy, how do you break an egg?"

Dee Dee looked at me. She knew what I was thinking. I remained silent.

"All right, Renny, come here and I'll show you."

Renny walked over to the stove. Dee Dee picked up an egg. "You see, you just break the shell against the side of the pan …

like this … and let the egg fall out of the shell into the pan … like this… .”

“Oh …”

“It’s simple.”

“And how do you cook it?”

“We fry it. In butter.”

“Mommy, I can’t eat that egg.”

“Why?”

“Because the yoke is broken!”

Dee Dee turned around and looked at me. Her eyes said, “Hank, don’t say a goddamned word… .”

A few mornings later found us all in the breakfast nook again. We were eating while the maid worked in the kitchen. Dee Dee said to Renny, “You’ve got your bike now. I want you to pick up a 6-pack sometime today. When I get home I want a Coke or two to drink.”

“But, Mommy, those Cokes are heavy! Can’t you get them?”

“Renny, I work all day and I’m tired. You get the Cokes.”

“But, Mommy, there’s a hill. I’ll have to pedal over the hill.”

“There’s no hill. What hill?”

“Well, you can’t see it with your eyes, but it’s there… .”

“Renny, you get those Cokes, understand?”

Renny got up, walked to his bedroom and slammed the door. Dee Dee looked away. “He’s testing me. He wants to see if I love him.”

“I’ll get the Cokes,” I said.

“That’s all right,” said Dee Dee, “I’ll get them.”

Finally, none of us got them… .

Dee Dee and I were at my place a few days later picking up the mail and looking around when the phone rang. It was Lydia. “Hi,” she said, “I’m in Utah.”

“I got your note,” I said.

“How are you doing?” she asked.

“Everything’s all right.”

“Utah’s nice in the summer. You ought to come up here. We’ll go camping. All my sisters are here.”

"I can't get away right now."

"Why?"

"Well, I'm with Dee Dee."

"Dee Dee?"

"Well, yes …"

"I knew you'd use that phone number," she said. "I told you you'd use that number!"

Dee Dee was standing next to me. "Please tell her," she said, "to give me until September."

"Forget her," Lydia said. "To hell with her. You come up here and see me."

"I can't drop everything just because you phone. Besides," I said, "I'm giving Dee Dee until September."

"September?"

"Yes."

Lydia screamed. It was a long loud scream. Then she hung up.

After that Dee Dee kept me away from my place. Once, while we were at my place going over the mail, I noticed the phone off the hook. "Never do that again," I told her.

Dee Dee took me for long rides up and down the coast. She took me on trips to the mountains. We went to garage sales, to movies, to rock concerts, to churches, to friends, to dinners and lunches, to magic shows, picnics and circuses. Her friends photographed us together.

The trip to Catalina was horrible. I waited with Dee Dee on the dock. I was really hungover. Dee Dee got me an Alka-Seltzer and a glass of water. The only thing that helped was a young girl sitting across from us. She had a beautiful body, long good legs, and she wore a mini-skirt. With the mini-skirt she wore long stockings, a garter belt, and she had on pink panties under the red skirt. She even wore high heeled shoes.

"You're looking at her, aren't you?" asked Dee Dee.

"I can't stop."

"She's a slut."

"Sure."

The slut got up and played pinball, wiggling her behind to help the balls fall in. Then she sat back down, showing more than ever.

The seaplane came in, unloaded, and then we stood out on the dock and waited to board. The seaplane was red, of 1936 vintage, had two propellers, one pilot and 8 or 10 seats.

If I don't puke in that thing, I thought, I will have fooled the world.

The girl in the mini-skirt wasn't getting on.

Why was it that every time you saw a woman like that you were always with another woman?

We got on, strapped ourselves in.

"Oh," said Dee Dee, "I'm so excited! I'm going up and sit with the pilot!"

"O.K."

So we took off and Dee Dee was up there sitting with the pilot. I could see her talking away. She did enjoy life or she appeared to. Lately it didn't mean much to me—I mean her excited and happy reaction to life—it irritated me somewhat, but mostly it left me without feeling. It didn't even bore me.

We flew and we landed, the landing was rough, we swung low along some cliffs and bounced and the spray went up. It was something like being in a speed boat. Then we taxied to another dock and Dee Dee came back and told me all about the seaplane and the pilot, and the conversation. There was a big piece cut out of the floor up there, and she'd asked the pilot, "Is this thing safe?" and he had answered, "Damned if I know."

Dee Dee had gotten us a hotel room right on the shore, on the top floor. There was no refrigeration so she got a plastic tub and packed ice in it for my beer. There was a black and white t. v. and a bathroom. Class.

We went for a walk along the shore. The tourists were of two types—either very young or very old. The old walked about in pairs, man and woman, in their sandals and dark shades and straw hats and walking shorts and wildly-colored shirts. They were fat and pale with blue veins in their legs and their faces were puffed and white in the sun. They sagged everywhere, folds and pouches of skin hung from their cheekbones and under their jowls.

The young were slim, and seemed made of smooth rubber. The girls had no breasts and tiny behinds and the boys had tender soft faces and grinned and blushed and laughed. But they all seemed contented, young high school people and old people. There was very little for them to do, but they lounged in the sun and seemed fulfilled.

Dee Dee went into the shops. She was delighted with the shops, buying beads, ashtrays, toy dogs, postcards, necklaces, figurines, and seemed happy with everything. "Oooh, look!" She talked to the shop owners. She seemed to like them. She promised one lady that she would write when she got back to the mainland. They had a mutual friend—a man who played percussion in a rock band.

Dee Dee bought a cage with two love birds and we went back to the hotel. I opened a beer and turned on the t.v. The selection was limited.

"Let's go for another walk," said Dee Dee. "It's so lovely outside."

"I'm going to sit here and rest," I said.

"You don't mind if I go without you?"

"It's all right."

She kissed me and left. I turned off the t.v. and opened another beer. Nothing to do on this island but get drunk. I walked to the window. On the beach below Dee Dee was sitting next to a young man, talking happily, smiling and gesturing with her hands. The young man grinned back. It felt good not to be part of that sort of thing. I was glad I wasn't in love, that I wasn't happy with the world. I like being at odds with everything. People in love often become edgy, dangerous. They lose their sense of perspective.

They lose their sense of humor. They become nervous, psychotic bores. They even become killers.

Dee Dee was gone 2 or 3 hours. I looked at some t. v. and typed 2 or 3 poems on a portable typer. Love poems—about Lydia. I hid them in my suitcase. I drank some more beer.

Then Dee Dee knocked and entered. "Oh, I had the most wonderful time! First I went on the glass-bottom boat. We could see all the different fish in the sea, everything! Then I found another boat that takes people out to where their boats are moored. This young man let me ride for hours for a dollar! His back was sunburned and I rubbed it with lotion. He was terribly burned. We took people out to their boats. And you should have seen the people on those boats! Mostly old men, craggy old men, with young girls. The young girls all wore boots and were drunk and on dope, strung-out, moaning. Some of the old guys had young boys, but most of them had young girls, sometimes two or three or four young girls. Every boat stank of dope and booze and lechery. It was wonderful!"

"That does sound good. I wish I had your knack of turning up interesting people."

"You can go tomorrow. You can ride all day for a dollar."

"I'll pass."

"Did you write today?"

"A little."

"Was it good?"

"You never know until 18 days later."

Dee Dee went over and looked at the love birds, talked to them. She was a good woman. I liked her. She was really concerned about me, she wanted me to do well, she wanted me to write well, she wanted me to fuck well, look well. I could feel it. It was fine. Maybe we could fly to Hawaii together some day. I walked up behind her and kissed her on the right ear, down by the lobe.

"Oh, Hank," she said.

Back in L.A., after our week in Catalina, we were sitting around my place one evening, which was unusual. It was late at night. We were lying on my bed, naked, when the phone rang in the next room.

It was Lydia.

"Hank?"

"Yes?"

"Where've you been?"

"Catalina."

"With her?"

"Yes."

"Listen, after you told me about her I got mad. I had an affair. It was with a homosexual. It was awful."

"I've missed you, Lydia."

"I want to come back to L.A."

"That'd be good."

"If I come back will you give her up?"

"She's a good woman, but if you come back I'll give her up."

"I'm coming back. I love you, old man."

"I love you too."

We went on talking. I don't know how long we talked. When it was over I walked back into the bedroom. Dee Dee seemed asleep. "Dee Dee?" I asked. I lifted one of her arms. It felt very limp. The flesh felt like rubber. "Stop joking, Dee Dee, I know you're not asleep." She didn't move. I looked around and noticed her bottle of sleeping pills was empty. It had been full. I had tried those pills. Just one of them put you to sleep, only it was more like being knocked out and buried underground.

"You took the pills… ."

"I … don't … care … you're going back to her … I don't … care… ."

I ran into the kitchen and got the dishpan, came back and placed it on the floor by the bed. Then I pulled Dee Dee's head and shoulders over the edge and stuck my fingers down her throat. She vomited. I lifted her up and let her breathe a moment, then repeated the process. I did it again and again. Dee Dee kept vomiting. Once, as I lifted her up, her teeth popped out. They lay there on the sheet, uppers and lowers.

"Oooh … my teeth," she said. Or tried to say.

"Don't worry about your teeth."

I stuck my fingers down her throat again. Then I pulled her back.

“I don’,” she said, “wans ya to seee my teethhhs… .”

“They’re all right, Dee Dee. They’re really not bad.”

“Ooooh …”

She revived long enough to put her teeth back in. “Take me home,” she said, “I want to go home.”

“I’ll stay with you. I won’t leave you alone tonight.” “But you will leave me, finally?” “Let’s get dressed,” I said.

Valentino would have kept both Lydia and Dee Dee. That’s why he died so young.

20

Lydia returned and found a nice apartment in the Burbank area. She seemed to care a lot more for me than before we parted. “My husband had this big cock and that’s all he had. He had no personality, no vibes. Just a big cock and he thought that was all he had to have. But Christ he was dull! With you, I keep getting vibes … this electric feedback, it never stops.” We were on the bed together.

“And I didn’t even know he had a big cock because his cock was the first one I had ever seen.” She was examining me closely. “I thought they were all like that.”

“Lydia …”

“What is it?”

“I’ve got to tell you something.”

“What is it?”

“I’ve got to go see Dee Dee.”

“Go see Dee Dee?”

“Don’t be funny. There’s a reason.”

“You said it was all over.”

“It is. I just don’t want to let her down too hard. I want to explain to her what happened. People are too cold with each other. I don’t want her back, I just want to try to explain what happened, so she’ll understand.”

“You want to fuck her.”

“No, I don’t want to fuck her. I hardly wanted to fuck her when I was with her. I just want to explain.”

“I don’t like it. It sounds … icky … to me.”

“Let me do it. Please. I just want to clear things up. I’ll be back soon.”

“All right. But make it soon.”

I got into the Volks, cut over to Fountain, went a few miles, then took a north at Bronson and cut up to where the rents were high. I parked outside, got out. I walked up the long flight of stairs and rang the bell. Bianca answered the door. I remembered one night she had answered the door naked and I had grabbed her and as we were kissing Dee Dee came down and said, "What the hell's going on here?"

This time it wasn't like that. Bianca said, "What do you want?"

"I want to see Dee Dee. I want to talk to her."

"She's sick. Really sick. I don't think you should get to see her after the way you've treated her. You're a real grade-A son of a bitch."

"I just want to talk to her a while, to explain things."

"All right. She's in her bedroom."

I walked down the hall and into the bedroom. Dee Dee was on the bed in just her panties. One arm was flung over her eyes. Her breasts looked good. There was an empty pint of whiskey by her bed and a pan on the floor. The pan smelled of vomit and booze.

"Dee Dee …"

She lifted her arm. "What? Hank, you've come back?"

"No, wait, I just want to talk to you… ."

"Oh Hank, I've missed you something awful. I've been nearly crazy, the pain has been awful. …"

"I want to make it easier. That's why I came by. I may be stupid, but I don't believe in outright cruelty… ."

"You don't know how I've felt. …"

"I know. I've been there."

"Want a drink?" she pointed.

I picked up the empty pint and sadly put it down again. "There's too much coldness in the world," I told her. "If people would only talk things out together it would help."

"Stay with me, Hank. Don't go back to her, please. Please. I've lived long enough to know how to be a good woman. You know that. I'd be good to you and for you."

"Lydia has a grip on me. I can't explain it."

"She's a flirt. She's impulsive. She'll leave you."

"Maybe that's some of the attraction."

"You want a whore. You're afraid of love."

"You might be right."

"Just kiss me. Would it be too much to ask you to kiss me?"

"No."

I stretched out next to her. We embraced. Dee Dee's mouth smelled of vomit. She kissed, we kissed and she held me. I broke away as gently as I could.

"Hank," she said, "Stay with me! Don't go back to her! Look, I have nice legs!"

Dee Dee lifted one of her legs and showed it to me.

"And I have nice ankles too! Look!"

She showed me her ankles.

I was sitting on the edge of the bed. "I can't stay with you, Dee Dee—"

She sat up and began punching me. Her fists were as hard as rocks. She threw punches with both hands. I sat there as she landed blows. She hit me above the eye, in the eye, on the forehead and cheeks. I even caught one in the throat. "Oh, you bastard! Bastard, bastard, bastard! I HATE YOU!"

I grabbed her wrists. "All right, Dee Dee, that's enough." She fell back on the bed as I got up and walked out, down the hall and out the door.

When I got back Lydia was sitting in an armchair. Her face looked dark. "You've been gone a long time. Look at me! You fucked her, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't."

"You were gone an awful long time. Look, she scratched your face!"

"I tell you, nothing happened."

"Take off your shirt. I want to look at your back!"

"Oh, shit, Lydia."

"Take off your shirt and undershirt."

I took them off. She walked around behind me.

"What's that scratch on your back?"

"What scratch?"

"There's a long one there … from a woman's fingernail."

"If it's there you put it there… ."

“All right. I know one way to find out.”

“How?”

“Let’s go to bed.”

“All right!”

I passed the test, but afterwards I thought, how can a man test a woman’s fidelity? It seemed unfair.

21

I kept getting letters from a lady who lived only a mile or so away. She signed them Nicole. She said she had read some of my books and liked them. I answered one of her letters and she responded with an invitation to visit. One afternoon, without saying anything to Lydia, I got into the Volks and drove on over. She had a flat over a dry cleaner's on Santa Monica Boulevard. Her door was on the street and I could see a stairway through the glass. I rang the bell. "Who is it?" came a woman's voice through a little tin speaker. "I'm Chinaski," I said. A buzzer sounded and I pushed the door open.

Nicole stood at the top of the stairs looking down at me. She had a cultured, almost tragic face and wore a long green housedress cut low in front. Her body seemed to be very good. She looked at me with large dark brown eyes. There were lots of tiny wrinkles around her eyes, perhaps from too much drinking or crying.

"Are you alone?" I asked.

"Yes," she smiled, "come on up."

I went up. It was spacious, two bedrooms, with very little furniture. I noticed a small bookcase and a rack of classical records. I sat on the couch. She sat next to me. "I just finished," she said, "reading The Life of Picasso."

There were several copies of The New Yorker on the coffee table.

"Can I fix you some tea?" Nicole asked.

"I'll go out and get something to drink."

"That's not necessary. I have something."

"What?"

"Some good red wine?"

"I'd like some," I said.

Nicole got up and walked into the kitchen. I watched her move. I had always liked women in long dresses. She moved gracefully. She seemed to have a lot of class. She returned with two glasses and the bottle of wine and poured. She offered me a Benson and Hedges. I lit one.

"Do you read The New Yorker?" she asked. "They print some good stories."

"I don't agree."

"What's wrong with them?

"They're too educated."

"I like them."

"Well, shit," I said.

We sat drinking and smoking.

"Do you like my apartment?"

"Yes, it's nice."

"It reminds me of some of the places I've had in Europe. I like the space, the light."

"Europe, huh?"

"Yes, Greece, Italy … Greece, mostly."

"Paris?"

"Oh yes, I liked Paris. London, no."

Then she told me about herself. Her family had lived in New York City. Her father was a communist, her mother a seamstress in a sweatshop. Her mother had worked the front machine, she was number one, the best of all of them. Tough and likeable. Nicole was self-educated, had grown up in New York, had somehow met a famous doctor, married, lived with him for ten years, then divorced him. She now received only $400 a month alimony, and it was difficult to manage. She couldn't afford her apartment, but she liked it too much to leave.

"Your writing," she said to me, "it's so raw. It's like a sledge hammer, and yet it has humor and tenderness… ."

"Yeah," I said.

I put my drink down and looked at her. I cupped her chin in my hand and drew her towards me. I gave her the tiniest kiss.

Nicole continued talking. She told me quite a few interesting stories, some of which I decided to use myself, either as stories or poems. I watched her breasts as she bent forward and poured drinks. It's like a movie, I thought, like a fucking movie. It seemed funny to me. It felt as if we were on camera. I liked it. It was better than the racetrack, it was better than the boxing matches. We kept drinking. Nicole opened a new bottle. She talked on. It was easy to listen to her. There was wisdom and some laughter in each of her rales. Nicole was impressing me more than she knew. That worried me, somewhat.

We walked out on the veranda with our drinks and watched the afternoon traffic. She was talking about Huxley and Lawrence in Italy. What shit. I told her that Knut Hamsun had been the world's greatest writer. She looked at me, astonished that I'd heard of him, then agreed. We kissed on the veranda, and I could smell the exhaust from the cars in the street below. Her body felt good against mine. I knew we weren't going to fuck right away, but I also knew that I would be coming back. Nicole knew it too.

22

Lydia’s sister Angela came to town from Utah to see Lydia’s new house. Lydia had made a down payment on a little place and the monthly payments were very low. It was a very good buy. The man who sold the house believed he was going to die and he had sold it much too cheap. There was an upstairs bedroom for the children, and an extremely large backyard filled with trees and clumps of bamboo.

Angela was the oldest of the sisters, the most sensible, with the best body, and was the most realistic. She sold real estate. But there was the problem of where to put Angela. We didn’t have room. Lydia suggested Marvin.

“Marvin?” I asked.

“Yes, Marvin,” said Lydia.

“All right, let’s go,” I said.

We all climbed into Lydia’s orange Thing. The Thing. That’s what we called her car. It looked like a tank, very old and ugly. It was late evening. We had already phoned Marvin. He had said he’d be home all evening.

We drove down to the beach and there was his little house by the shore. “Oh,” said Angela, “what a nice house.”

“He’s rich, too,” said Lydia.

“And he writes good poetry,” I said.

We got out. Marvin was in there with his saltwater fish tanks and his paintings. He painted pretty well. For a rich kid he had survived nicely, he had come through. I made the introductions. Angela walked around looking at Marvin’s paintings. “Oh, very nice.” Angela painted too, but she wasn’t very good.

I had brought some beer and had a pint of whiskey hidden in my coat pocket which I nipped on from time to time. Marvin brought out some more beer and a mild flirtation began between Marvin and Angela. Marvin seemed eager enough but

Angela seemed inclined to laugh at him. She liked him, but not well enough to fuck him right away. We drank and talked. Marvin had bongo drums and a piano and some grass. He had a good, comfortable house. In a house like this I could write better, I thought, my luck would be better. You could hear the ocean and there were no neighbors to complain about the noise of a typewriter.

I continued to nip at the whiskey. We stayed 2 or 3 hours, then left. Lydia took the freeway back.

"Lydia," I said, "you fucked Marvin, didn't you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The time you went over there late at night, alone."

"Goddamn you, I don't want to hear that!"

"Well, it's true, you fucked him!"

"Listen, if you keep it up I'm not going to stand for it!"

"You fucked him."

Angela looked frightened. Lydia drove over to the shoulder of the freeway, stopped the car and pushed the door open on my side. "Get out!" she said.

I got out. The car drove off. I walked along the shoulder of the freeway. I took the pint out and had a nip. I walked along about 5 minutes when the Thing pulled up alongside me. Lydia opened the door. "Get in." I got in.

"Don't say a word."

"You fucked him. I know you did."

"Oh Christ!"

Lydia drove back on to the shoulder of the freeway and pushed the door open again. "Get out!"

I got out. I walked along the shoulder. Then I came to an offramp that led to a deserted street. I walked down the offramp and along the street. It was very dark. I looked into the windows of some of the houses. Apparently I was in a black district. I saw some lights ahead at an intersection. There was a hot dog stand. I walked up to it. A black man was behind the counter. There was nobody else around. I ordered coffee.

"Goddamned women," I said to him. "They are beyond all reason. My girl let me off on the freeway. Want a drink?"

"Sure," he said.

He took a good hit and handed it back.

"You got a phone?" I asked. "I'll pay you."

"Is it a local call?"

"Yes."

"No charge."

He pulled a phone from underneath the counter and handed it to me. I took a drink and handed him the bottle. He took one.

I called the Yellow Cab Co., gave them the location. My friend had a kind and intelligent face. Goodness could be found sometimes in the middle of hell. We passed the bottle back and forth as I waited for the cab. When the cab arrived I got into the back and gave the cabby Nicole's address.

23

I blacked out after that. I guess I had consumed more whiskey than I thought. I don’t remember arriving at Nicole’s. I awakened in the morning with my back to somebody in a strange bed. I looked at the wall facing me and there was a large decorative letter hanging there. It said “N.” The”N” was for “Nicole.” I felt sick. I went to the bathroom. I used Nicole’s toothbrush, gagged. I washed my face, combed my hair, crapped and pissed, washed my hands and drank a great deal of water from the bathroom faucet. Then I went back to bed. Nicole got up, did her toilet, came back. She faced me. We began to kiss and fondle one another.

I am innocent in my fashion, Lydia, I thought. I am faithful to thee in my fashion.

No oral sex. My stomach was too upset. I mounted the famous doctor’s ex-wife. The cultured world traveler. She had the Bronte sisters in her bookcase. We both liked Carson McCullers. The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. I gave her 3 or 4 particularly mean rips and she gasped. Now she knew a writer firsthand. Not a very well-known writer, of course, but I managed to pay the rent and that was astonishing. One day she’d be in one of my books. I was fucking a culture-bitch. I felt myself nearing a climax. I pushed my tongue into her mouth, kissed her, and climaxed. I rolled off feeling foolish. I held her a while, then she went into the bathroom. She would have been a better fuck in Greece, maybe. America was a shitty place to fuck.

After that I visited Nicole 2 or 3 times a week in the mid-afternoons. We drank wine, talked, and now and then made love. I found I wasn’t particularly interested in her, it was just something to do. Lydia and I had made up the next day. She would question me about where I went in the afternoon. “I’ve been to the supermarket,” I’d tell her, and it was true. I’d go to the supermarket first.

"I've never seen you spend so much time at the supermarket." I got drunk one night and mentioned to Lydia that I knew a certain Nicole. I told her where Nicole lived, but that "not much was going on." Why I told her this was not quite clear to me, but when one drinks one sometimes thinks unclearly… .

One afternoon I was coming from the liquor store and had just reached Nicole's. I was carrying two 6-packs of bottled beer and a pint of whiskey. Lydia and I had recently had another fight and I had decided to stay the night with Nicole. I was walking along, already a bit intoxicated, when I heard someone run up behind me. I turned. It was Lydia. "Ha!" she said. "Ha!"

She grabbed the bag of liquor out of my hand and began pulling out the beer bottles. She smashed them on the pavement one by one. They made large explosions. Santa Monica Boulevard is very busy. The afternoon traffic was just beginning to build up. All this action was taking place just outside Nicole's door. Then Lydia reached the pint of whiskey. She held it up and screamed up at me, "Ha! You were going to drink this and then you were going to FUCK her!" She smashed the pint on the cement.

Nicole's door was open and Lydia ran up the stairway. Nicole was standing at the top of the stairs. Lydia began hitting Nicole with her large purse. It had long straps and she swung it as hard as she could. "He's my man! He's my man! You stay away from my man!"

Then Lydia ran down past me, out the door and into the street.

"Good god," said Nicole, "who was that?"

"That was Lydia. Let me have a broom and a large paper bag."

I went down into the street and began sweeping up the broken glass and placing it in the brown paper bag. That bitch has gone too far this time, I thought. I'll go and buy more liquor. I'll stay the night with Nicole, maybe a couple of nights.

I was bent over picking up the glass when I heard a strange sound behind me. I looked around. It was Lydia in the Thing. She had it up on the sidewalk and was driving straight towards me at about 30 m.p.h. I leaped aside as the car went by, missing me by an inch. The car ran down to the end of the block, bumped down off the curb, continued up the street, then took a right at the next corner and was gone.

I went back to sweeping up the glass. I got it all swept up and put away. Then I reached down into the original paper bag and found one undamaged bottle of beer. It looked very good. I really needed it. I was about to unscrew the cap when someone grabbed it out of my hand. It was Lydia again. She ran up to Nicole's door with the bottle and hurled it at the glass. She hurled it with such velocity that it went straight through like a large bullet, not smashing the entire window but leaving just a round hole.

Lydia ran off and I walked up the stairway. Nicole was still standing there. "For god's sake, Chinaski, leave with her before she kills everybody!"

I turned and walked back down the stairway. Lydia was sitting in her car at the curbing with the engine running. I opened the door and got in. She drove off. Neither of us spoke a word.

24

I began receiving letters from a girl in New York City. Her name was Mindy. She had run across a couple of my books, but the best thing about her letters was that she seldom mentioned writing except to say that she was not a writer. She wrote about things in general and men and sex in particular. Mindy was 25, wrote in longhand, and the handwriting was stable, sensible, yet humorous. I answered her letters and was always glad to find one of hers in my mailbox. Most people are much better at saying things in letters than in conversation, and some people can write artistic, inventive letters, but when they try a poem or story or novel they become pretentious.

Then Mindy sent some photographs. If they were faithful she was quite beautiful. We wrote for several more weeks and then she mentioned that she had a 2 week vacation coming up.

Why don't you fly out? I suggested.

All right, she replied.

We began to phone one another. Finally she gave me her arrival date at L.A. International.

I'll be there, I told her, nothing will stop me.

25

I kept the date in mind. It was never any problem creating a split with Lydia. I was naturally a loner, content just to live with a woman, eat with her, sleep with her, walk down the street with her. I didn't want conversation, or to go anywhere except the racetrack or the boxing matches. I didn't understand t.v. I felt foolish paying money to go into a movie theatre and sit with other people to share their emotions. Parties sickened me. I hated the game-playing, the dirty play, the flirting, the amateur drunks, the bores. But parties, dancing, small talk energized Lydia. She considered herself a sexpot. But she was a little too obvious. So our arguments often grew out of my wish for no-people-at-all versus her wish for as-many-people-as-often-as-possible.

A couple of days before Mindy's arrival I started it. We were on the bed together.

"Lydia, for Christ's sake, why are you so stupid? Don't you realize I'm a loner? A recluse? I have to be that way to write."

"How can you learn anything about people if you don't meet them?"

"I already know all about them."

"Even when we go out to eat in a restaurant, you keep your head down, you don't look at anybody."

"Why make myself sick?"

"I observe people," she said. "I study them."

"Shit!"

"You're afraid of people!"

"I hate them."

"How can you be a writer? You don't observe!"

"O.K., I don't look at people, but I earn the rent with my writing. It beats tending sheep."

"You're not going to last. You'll never make it. You're doing it all wrong."

"That's why I'm making it."

"Making it? Who the hell knows who you are? Are you famous like Mailer? Like Capote?"

"They can't write."

"But you can! Only you, Chinaski, can write!"

"Yes, that's how I feel."

"Are you famous? If you went to New York City, would anybody know you?"

"Listen I don't care about that. I just want to go on writing. I don't need trumpets."

"You'd take all the trumpets you could get."

"Maybe."

"You like to pretend you're already famous."

"I have always acted the same way, even before I wrote."

"You're the most unknown famous man I ever met."

"I'm just not ambitious."

"You are but you're lazy. You want it for nothing. When do you write anyhow? When do you do it? You're always in bed or drunk or at the racetrack."

"I don't know. It's not important."

"What's important then?"

"You tell me," I said.

"Well, I'll tell you what's important!" Lydia said. "We haven't had a party for a long time. I haven't seen any people for a long time! I LIKE people! My sisters LOVE parties. They'll drive a thousand miles to go to a party! That's how we were raised in Utah! There's nothing wrong with parties. It's just people LETTING GO and having a good time! You've got this crazy idea in your head. You think having fun leads to fucking! Jesus Christ, people are decent! You just don't know how to have a good time!"

"I don't like people," I said.

Lydia leaped off of the bed. "Jesus, you make me sick!"

"All right, then, I'll give you some room."

I swung my legs off the bed and began putting my shoes on.

“Some room?” Lydia asked. “What do you mean by ‘some room’?”

“I mean, I am getting the hell out of here!”

“O.K., but listen to this: if you walk out the door now you won’t see me again!”

“Fair enough,” I said.

I stood up, walked to the door, opened it, closed it and walked down to the Volks. I started the engine and drove off. I had made some room for Mindy.

26

I sat in the airport and waited. You never knew about photos. You could never tell. I was nervous. I felt like vomiting. I lit a cigarette and gagged. Why did I do these things? I didn't want her now. And Mindy was flying all the way from New York City. I knew plenty of women. Why always more women? What was I trying to do? New affairs were exciting but they were also hard work. The first kiss, the first fuck had some drama. People were interesting at first. Then later, slowly but surely, all the flaws and madness would manifest themselves. I would become less and less to them; they would mean less and less to me.

I was old and I was ugly. Maybe that's why it felt so good to stick it into young girls. I was King Kong and they were lithe and tender. Was I trying to screw my way past death? By being with young girls did I hope I wouldn't grow old, feel old? I just didn't want to age badly, simply quit, be dead before death itself arrived.

Mindy's plane landed and taxied in. I felt I was in danger. Women knew me beforehand because they had read my books. I had exposed myself. On the other hand, I knew nothing of them. I was the real gambler. I could get killed, I could get my balls cut off. Chinaski without balls. Love Poems of a Eunuch.

I stood waiting for Mindy. The passengers came out of the gate.

Oh, I hope she's not the one.

Or her.

Or especially her.

Now that one would be fine! Look at those legs, that behind, those eyes… .

One of them moved towards me. I hoped it was her. She was the best of the whole damned lot. I couldn't be that lucky. She walked up to me and smiled. "I'm Mindy."

"I'm glad you're Mindy."

"I'm glad you're Chinaski."

"Do you have to wait for your baggage?"

"Yes, I brought enough for a long stay!"

"Let's wait in the bar."

We walked in and found a table. Mindy ordered a vodka and tonic. I ordered a vodka-7. Ah, almost in tune. I lit her cigarette. She looked fine. Almost virginal. It was difficult to believe. She was small, blond and perfectly put together. She was more natural than sophisticated. I found it easy to look at her eyes—blue-green. She wore 2 tiny earrings. And she wore high heels. I had told Mindy that high heels excited me.

"Well," she said, "are you frightened?"

"Not so much anymore. I like you."

"You look much better than your photos," she said. "I don't think you're ugly at all."

"Thanks."

"Oh, I don't mean you're handsome, not the way people think of handsome. Your face seems kind. But your eyes—they're beautiful. They're wild, crazy, like some animal peering out of a forest on fire. God, something like that. I'm not very good with words."

"I think that you're beautiful," I said. "And very nice. I feel good around you. I think it's good that we're together. Drink up.

We need another. You're like your letters."

We had the second drink and went down for the luggage. I was proud to be with Mindy. She walked with style. So many women with good bodies just slouched along like overloaded creatures. Mindy flowed.

I kept thinking, this is too good. This is simply not possible.

Back at my place Mindy took a bath and changed clothes. She came out in a light blue dress. She had changed her hair style, just a bit. We sat on the couch together with the vodka and the vodka mix. "Well," I said, "I'm still scared. I'm going to get a little drunk."

"Your place is just the way I thought it would be," she said.

She was looking at me, smiling. I reached out and touched her just behind the neck, moved her towards me, and gave her a light kiss.

The phone rang. It was Lydia.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm with a friend."

"It's a woman, isn't it?"

"Lydia, our relationship is over," I said. "You know that."

"IT'S A WOMAN, ISN'T IT?"

"Yes."

"Well, all right."

"All right. Goodbye."

"Goodbye," she said.

Lydia's tone had suddenly calmed down. I felt better. Her violence frightened me. She always claimed that I was the jealous one, and I was often jealous, but when I saw things working against me I simply became disgusted and withdrew. Lydia was different. She reacted. She was the Head Cheerleader at the Game of Violence.

But by her tone I knew that she had given up. That she was not enraged. I knew that voice.

"That was my ex," I told Mindy.

"Is it over?"

"Yes."

"Does she still love you?"

"I think so."

"Then it's not over."

"It's over."

"Should I stay?"

"Of course. Please."

"You're not just using me? I've read all those love poems … to Lydia."

"I was in love. And I'm not using you."

Mindy pressed her body against me and kissed me. It was a long kiss. My cock rose. I had recently been taking a lot of vitamin E. I had my own ideas about sex. I was constantly horny and masturbated continually. I'd make love to Lydia and then come back to my place and masturbate in the morning. The thought of sex as something forbidden excited me beyond all reason. It was like one animal knifing another into submission.

When I came I felt it was in the face of everything decent, white sperm dripping down over the heads and souls of my dead parents. If I had been born a woman I would certainly have been a prostitute. Since I had been born a man, I craved women constantly, the lower the better. And yet women—good women— frightened me because they eventually wanted your soul, and what was left of mine, I wanted to keep. Basically I craved prostitutes, base women, because they were deadly and hard and made no personal demands. Nothing was lost when they left. Yet at the same time I yearned for a gentle, good woman, despite the overwhelming price. Either way I was lost. A strong man would give up both. I wasn't strong. So I continued to struggle with women, with the idea of women.

Mindy and I finished the bottle and then went to bed. I kissed her for a while, then apologized, and drew away. I was too drunk to perform. One hell of a great lover. I promised her many great experiences in the near future, then fell asleep with her body pressed against me.

In the morning I awakened, sickened. I looked at Mindy, naked next to me. Even then, after all the drinking, she was a miracle. Never had I known a young girl so beautiful and at the same time so gentle and intelligent. Where were her men? Where had they failed?

I went into the bathroom and tried to get cleaned up. I gagged on Lavoris. I shaved and put on some shaving lotion. I wet my hair and combed it. I went to the refrigerator, took a 7-UP, drank it down.

I went back to the bed and climbed in. Mindy was warm, her body was warm. She seemed to be asleep. I liked that. I rubbed my lips against hers, softly. My cock rose. I felt her breasts against me. I took one and sucked on it. I felt the nipple harden.

Mindy stirred. I reached down and felt along her belly, down towards the cunt. I began rubbing her cunt, easily.

It’s like making a rosebud open, I thought. This has meaning. This is good. It’s like two insects in a garden moving slowly towards each other. The male works his slow magic. The female slowly opens. I like it, I like it. Two bugs. Mindy is opening, she is getting wet. She is beautiful. Then I mounted her. I slid it in, my mouth on hers.

27

We drank all day and that night I tried again to make love to Mindy. I was astounded and dismayed to find she had a large pussy. An extra large pussy. I hadn't noticed it the night before. That was a tragedy. Woman's greatest sin. I worked and I worked. Mindy lay there as if she was enjoying it. I hoped to god she was. I began to sweat. My back ached. I was dizzy, sick. Her pussy seemed to get larger. I couldn't feel anything. It was like trying to fuck a large, loose paper bag. I was just barely touching the sides of her cunt. It was agony, it was relentless work without a reward. I felt damned. I didn't want to hurt her feelings. I desperately wanted to come. It wasn't just the drinking. I performed better than most when drinking. I heard my heart. I felt my heart. I felt it in my chest. I felt it in my throat. I felt it in my head. I couldn't bear it. I rolled off with a gasp.

"Sorry, Mindy, Jesus Christ, I'm sorry."

"It's all right, Hank," she said.

I rolled over on my stomach. I stank with sweat. I got up and poured two drinks. We sat upright in bed and drank the drinks, side by side. I couldn't understand how I had managed to come the first time. We had a problem. All that beauty, all that gentleness, all that goodness, and we had a problem. I was unable to tell Mindy what it was. I didn't know how to tell her she had a big cunt. Maybe nobody had ever told her.

"It will be better when I'm not drinking so much," I told her.

"Please don't worry, Hank."

"O.K."

We went to sleep or we pretended to go to sleep. Finally I did… .

28

Mindy stayed about a week. I introduced her to my friends. We went places. But nothing was resolved. I couldn't climax. She didn't seem to mind. It was strange.

Around 10:45 PM one evening Mindy was drinking in the front room and reading a magazine. I was lying on the bed in just my shorts, drunk, smoking, a drink on the chair. I was staring at the blue ceiling, not feeling or thinking about anything.

There was a knock on the front door.

Mindy said, "Should I get it?"

"Sure," I said, "go ahead."

I heard Mindy open the door. Then I heard Lydia's voice.

"I just came over to check out my competition."

Oh, I thought, this is nice. I'll get up and pour them both a drink, we'll all drink together and talk. I like my women to understand each other.

Then I heard Lydia say: "You're acute little thing, aren't you?"

Then I heard Mindy scream. And Lydia screamed. I heard scuffling, grunts, bodies flying. Furniture was upset. Mindy screamed again—the scream of one being attacked. Lydia screamed—the tigress at the kill. I leaped out of bed. I was going to separate them. I ran into the front room in my shorts. It was a hair-pulling, spitting, scratching, mad scene. I ran over to pull them apart. I stumbled over one of my shoes on the rug, fell heavily. Mindy ran out the door with Lydia right behind. They ran down the walk toward the street. I heard another scream.

Several minutes passed. I got up and closed the door. Evidently Mindy had gotten away because suddenly Lydia walked in. She sat down in a chair near the door. She looked at me.

"I'm sorry. I've pissed myself."

It was true. There was a dark stain in her crotch and one pant leg was soaked.

"It's all right," I said.

I poured Lydia a drink and she sat there holding it in her hand. I couldn't hold my drink in my hand. No one spoke. A short time later there was a knock on the door. I got up in my shorts and opened it. My huge, white, flabby belly hung out over the top of the shorts. Two policemen stood at the door.

"Hello," I said.

"We're answering a disturbance of the peace call."

"Just a little family argument," I said.

"We've got some details," said the cop standing closest to me. "There are two women."

"There usually are," I said.

"All right," said the first cop. "I just want to ask you one question."

"O.K."

"Which of the two women do you want?"

"I'll take that one." I pointed to Lydia sitting in the chair, all pissed over herself.

"All right, sir, are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

The cops walked off and there I was with Lydia again.

29

The phone rang the next morning. Lydia had gone back to her place. It was Bobby, the kid who lived in the next block and worked in the porno bookstore. “Mindy’s down here. She wants you to come and talk to her.”

“All right.”

I walked over with 3 bottles of beer. Mindy was dressed in high heels and a black see-through outfit from Frederick’s. It resembled a doll’s dress and you could see her black panties. There was no brassiere. Valerie wasn’t around. I sat down and twisted the beer caps off, passed the bottles.

“Are you going back to Lydia, Hank?” Mindy asked.

“Sorry, yes. I’m back.”

“That was rotten, what happened. I thought you and Lydia were finished?”

“I thought we were. Those things are very strange.”

“All my clothes are down at your place. I’ll have to come get them.”

“Of course.”

“Are you sure she’s gone?”

“Yes.”

“She acts like a bull, that woman, she acts like a dyke.”

“I don’t think she is.”

Mindy got up to go to the bathroom. Bobby looked at me. “I fucked her,” he said. “Don’t blame her. She had no other place to go.”

“I don’t blame her.”

“Valerie took her to Frederick’s to cheer her up. Got her a new outfit.”

Mindy came out of the bathroom. She’d been crying.

“Mindy,” I said, “I’ve got to go.”

“I’ll be down later for my clothes.”

I got up and walked out the door. Mindy followed me out there. “Hold me,” she said.

I held her. She was crying.

“You’re never going to forget me … never!”

I walked back to my place thinking, I wonder if Bobby fucked Mindy? Bobby and Valerie were into lots of strange new things. I didn’t care for their lack of common feeling. It was the way they did everything without any show of emotion. The same way another person might yawn or boil a potato.

30

To pacify Lydia I agreed to go to Muleshead, Utah. Her sister was camping in the mountains. The sisters actually owned much of the land. It had been inherited from their father. Glendoline, one of the sisters, had a tent pitched in the woods. She was writing a novel, The Wild Woman of the Mountains. The other sisters were to arrive any day. Lydia and I arrived first. We had a pup tent. We squeezed in there the first night and the mosquitoes squeezed in with us. It was terrible.

The next morning we sat around the campfire. Glendoline and Lydia cooked breakfast. I had purchased $40 worth of groceries which included several 6-packs of beer. I had them cooling in a mountain spring. We finished breakfast. I helped with the dishes and then Glendoline brought out her novel and read to us. It wasn't really bad, but it was very unprofessional and needed a lot of polishing. Glendoline presumed that the reader was as fascinated by her life as she was—which was a deadly mistake. The other deadly mistakes she had made were too numerous to mention.

I walked to the spring and came back with 3 bottles of beer. The girls said no, they didn't want any. They were very anti-beer. We discussed Glendoline's novel. I figured that anybody who would read their novel aloud to others had to be suspect. If that wasn't the old kiss of death, nothing was.

The conversation shifted and the girls started chatting about men, parties, dancing, and sex. Glendoline had a high, excited voice, and laughed nervously, laughed constantly. She was in her mid-forties, quite fat and very sloppy. Besides that, just like me, she was simply ugly.

Glendoline must have talked nonstop for over an hour, entirely about sex. I began to get dizzy. She waved her arms over her head, "I'M THE WILD WOMAN OF THE MOUNTAINS!

O WHERE O WHERE IS THE MAN, THE REAL MAN WITH THE COURAGE TO TAKE ME?”

Well, he’s certainly not here, I thought.

I looked at Lydia. “Let’s go for a walk.”

“No,” she said, “I want to read this book.” It was called Love and

Orgasm: A Revolutionary Guide to Sexual Fulfillment. “All right,” I said, “I’ll take a walk then.”

I walked up to the mountain spring. I reached in for another beer, opened it and sat there drinking. I was trapped in the mountains and woods with two crazy women. They took all the joy out of fucking by talking about it all the time. I liked to fuck too, but it wasn’t my religion. There were too many ridiculous and tragic things about it. People didn’t seem to know how to handle it. So they made a toy out of it. A toy that destroyed people.

The main thing, I decided, was to find the right woman. But how? I had a red notebook and a pen with me. I scribbled a meditative poem into it. Then I walked up to the lake. Vance Pastures, the place was called. The sisters owned most of it. I had to take a shit. I took off my pants and squatted in the brush with the flies and the mosquitoes. I’d take the conveniences of the city any time. I had to wipe with leaves. I walked over to the lake and stuck one foot in the water. It was ice cold.

Be a man, old man. Enter.

My skin was ivory white. I felt very old, very soft. I moved out into the ice water. I went in up to my waist, then I took a deep breath and leaped forward. I was all the way in! The mud swirled up from the bottom and got into my ears, my mouth, my hair. I stood there in the muddy water, my teeth chattering.

I waited a long time for the water to settle and clear. Then I walked back out. I got dressed and made my way along the edge of the lake. When I got to the end of the lake I heard a sound like that of a waterfall. I went into a forest, moving toward the sound. I had to climb around some rocks across a gully. The sound came closer and closer. The flies and mosquitoes swarmed all over me. The flies were large and angry and hungry, much larger than city flies, and they knew a meal when they saw one.

I pushed my way through some thick brush and there it was: my first real honest-to-Christ waterfall. The water just poured down the mountain and over a rocky ledge. It was beautiful. It kept coming and coming. That water was coming from somewhere. And it was running off somewhere. There were 3 or 4 streams that probably led to the lake.

Finally I got tired of watching it and decided to go back. I also decided to take a different route back, a shortcut. I worked my way down to the opposite side of the lake and cut off toward camp. I knew about where it was. I still had my red notebook. I stopped and wrote another poem, less meditative, then I went on. I kept walking. The camp didn't appear. I walked some more. I looked around for the lake. I couldn't find the lake, I didn't know where it was. Suddenly it hit me: I was LOST. Those horny sex bitches had driven me out of my mind and now I was LOST. I looked around. There was the backdrop of mountains and all around me were trees and brush. There was no center, no starting point, no connection between anything. I felt fear, real fear. Why had I let them take me out of my city, my Los Angeles? A man could call a cab there, he could telephone. There were reasonable solutions to reasonable problems.

Vance Pastures stretched out around me for miles and miles. I threw away my red notebook. What a way for a writer to die! I could see it in the newspaper:

HENRY CHINASKI, MINOR
POET, FOUND DEAD IN
UTAH WOODS

Henry Chinaski, former post office clerk turned writer, was found in a decomposed state yesterday afternoon by forest ranger W. K. Brooks Jr. Also found near the remains was a small red notebook which evidently contained Mr. Chinaski's last written work.

I walked on. Soon I was in a soggy area full of water. Every now and then one of my legs would sink to the knee in the bog and I'd have to haul myself out.

I came to a barbed wire fence. I knew immediately that I shouldn't climb the fence. I knew that it was the wrong thing to do, but there seemed no alternative. I climbed over the fence and stood there, cupped both hands around my mouth and screamed: "LYDIA!"

There was no answer.

I tried it again: "LYDIA!"

My voice sounded very mournful. The voice of a coward.

I moved on. It would be nice, I thought, to be back with the sisters, hearing them laugh about sex and men and dancing and parties. It would be so nice to hear Glendoline's voice. It would be nice to run my hand through Lydia's long hair. I'd faithfully take her to every party in town. I'd even dance with all the women and make brilliant jokes about everything. I'd endure all that subnormal driveling shit with a smile. I could almost hear myself. "Hey, that's a great dance tune! Who wants to really go? Who wants to boogie on out?"

I kept walking through the bog. Finally I reached dry land. I got to a road. It was just an old dirt road, but it looked good. I could see tire marks, hoof prints. There were even wires overhead that carried electricity somewhere. All I had to do was follow those wires. I walked along the road. The sun was high in the sky, it must have been noon. I walked along feeling foolish.

I came to a locked gate across the road. What did that mean? There was a small entry at one side of the gate. Evidently the gate was a cattle guard. But where were the cattle? Where was the owner of the cattle? Maybe he only came around every six months.

The top of my head began to ache. I reached up and felt where I had been blackjacked in a Philadelphia bar 30 years before. Some scar tissue remained. Now the scar tissue, baked by the sun, was swollen. It stood up like a small horn. I broke a piece off and threw it in the road.

I walked another hour, then decided to turn back. It meant having to walk all the way back yet I felt it was the thing to do. I took my shirt off and draped it over my head. I stopped once or twice and screamed, "LYDIA!" There was no reply.

Some time later I got back to the gate. All I had to do was walk around it but there was something in the way. It stood in front of the gate, about 15 feet from me. It was a small doe, a fawn, a something.

I moved slowly toward it. It didn't budge. Was it going to let me by? It didn't seem to fear me. I guessed it sensed my confusion, my cowardice. I approached closer and closer. It wouldn't get out of the way. It had large beautiful brown eyes, more beautiful than the eyes of any woman I had ever seen. I couldn't believe it. I was within 3 feet of it, ready to back off, when it bolted. It ran off the road and into the woods. It was in excellent shape; it could really run.

As I walked further along the road I heard the sound of running water. I needed water. You couldn't live very long without water. I left the road and moved toward the sound of rushing water. There was a little hill covered with grass and as I topped the hill there it was: water spilling out of several cement pipes in the face of a dam and into some kind of reservoir. I sat down at the edge of the reservoir and took off my shoes and stockings, pulled up my pants, and stuck my legs into the water. Then I poured water over my head. Then I drank—but not too much or too fast—just like I'd seen it done in the movies.

After recovering a bit I noticed a pier that went out over the reservoir. I walked out on the pier and came to a large metal box bolted to the side of the pier. It was locked with a padlock. There was probably a telephone in there! I could phone for help!

I went and found a large rock and started smashing it against the lock. It wouldn't give. What the hell would Jack London do? What would Hemingway do? Jean Genet?

I kept smashing the rock against the lock. Sometimes I missed and my hand hit the lock or the metal box itself. Skin ripped, blood flowed. I gathered myself and gave the lock one final blow. It opened. I took it off and opened the metal box. There was no telephone. There were a series of switches and some heavy cables. I reached in, touched a wire, and got a terrible shock. Then I pulled a switch. I heard the roar of water. Out of 3 or 4 of the holes in the concrete face of the dam shot giant white jets of water. I pulled another switch. Three or four other holes opened up, releasing tons of water. I pulled a third switch and the whole dam let loose. I stood and watched the water pouring forth. Maybe I could start a flood and cowboys would come on horses or in rugged little pickup trucks to rescue me. I could see the headline:

HENRY CHINASKI, MINOR POET, FLOODS UTAH COUNTRYSIDE IN ORDER TO SAVE HIS SOFT LOS ANGELES ASS.

I decided against it. I threw all the switches back to normal, closed the metal box, and hung the broken lock back on it.

I left the reservoir, found another road up the way, and began following it. This road seemed more used than the other. I walked along. I had never been so tired. I could hardly see. Suddenly there was a little girl about 5 years old walking towards me. She wore a little blue dress and white shoes. She looked frightened when she saw me. I tried to look pleasant and friendly as I edged towards her.

“Little girl, don’t go away. I won’t hurt you. I’M LOST! Where are your parents? Little girl, take me to your parents!”

The little girl pointed. I saw a trailer and a car parked up ahead. “HEY, I’m LOST!” I shouted. “CHRIST, AM I GLAD TO SEE YOU.”

Lydia stepped around the side of the trailer. Her hair was done up in red curlers. “Come on, city boy,” she said. “Follow me home.”

“I’m so glad to see you, baby, kiss me!”

“No. Follow me.”

Lydia took off running about 20 feet in front of me. It was hard keeping up.

"I asked those people if they had seen a city boy around," she called back over her shoulder. "They said, No."

"Lydia, I love you!"

"Come on! You're slow!"

"Wait, Lydia, wait!"

She vaulted over a barbed wire fence. I couldn't make it. I got tangled in the wire. I couldn't move. I was like a trapped cow. "LYDIA!"

She came back with her red curlers and started helping me get loose from the barbs. "I tracked you. I found your red notebook. You got lost deliberately because you were pissed."

"No, I got lost out of ignorance and fear. I am not a complete person—I'm a stunted city person. I am more or less a failed drizzling shit with absolutely nothing to offer." "Christ," she said, "don't you think I know that?" She freed me from the last barb. I lurched after her. I was back with Lydia again.

31

It was 3 or 4 days before I had to fly to Houston to give a reading. I went to the track, drank at the track, and afterwards I went to a bar on Hollywood Boulevard. I went home at 9 or 10 pm. As I moved through the bedroom towards the bathroom I tripped over the telephone cord. I fell against the corner of the bed frame—an edge of steel like a knife blade. When I got up I found I had a deep gash just above the ankle. The blood ran into the rug and I left a bloody trail as I went to the bathroom. The blood ran over the tiles and I left red footprints as I walked about.

There was a knock on the door and I let Bobby in. "Jesus Christ, man, what happened?"

"It's DEATH," I said. "I'm bleeding to death… ."

"Man," he said, "you better do something about that leg."

Valerie knocked. I let her in too. She screamed. I poured Bobby and Valerie and myself drinks. The phone rang. It was Lydia.

"Lydia, baby, I'm bleeding to death!"

"Is this one of your dramatic trips again?"

"No, I'm bleeding to death. Ask Valerie."

Valerie took the phone. "It's true, his ankle is cut open. There's blood everywhere and he won't do anything about it. You better come over. …"

When Lydia arrived I was sitting on the couch. "Look, Lydia: DEATH!" Tiny veins were hanging out of the wound like strings of spaghetti. I yanked at some of them. I took my cigarette and tapped ashes into the wound. "I'm a MAN! Hell, I'm a MAN!"

Lydia went and got some hydrogen peroxide and poured it into the wound. It was nice. White foam gushed out of the wound. It sizzled and bubbled. Lydia poured some more in.

"You better go to a hospital," Bobby said.

"I don't need a fucking hospital," I said. "It will cure itself… ."

The next morning the wound looked horrible. It was still open and seemed to be forming a nice crust. I went to the drugstore for some more hydrogen peroxide, some bandages, and some epsom salts. I filled the tub full of hot water and epsom salts and got in. I began thinking about myself with only one leg. There were advantages: HENRY CHINASKI IS, WITHOUT A DOUBT, THE

GREATEST ONE-LEGGED

POET IN THE WORLD

Bobby came by that afternoon. “You know what it costs to get a leg amputated?” “$12,000.” After Bobby left I phoned my doctor.

I went to Houston with a heavily bandaged leg. I was taking antibiotic pills in an attempt to cure the infection. My doctor mentioned that any drinking would nullify the good the antibiotic pills had.

At the reading, which was at the modern art museum, I went on sober. After I read a few poems somebody in the audience asked, “How come you’re not drunk?”

“Henry Chinaski couldn’t make it,” I said. “I’m his brother Efram.”

I read another poem and then confessed about the antibiotics. I also told them it was against museum rules to drink on the premises. Somebody from the audience came up with a beer. I drank it and read some more. Somebody else came up with another beer. Then the beers began to flow. The poems got better.

There was a party and a dinner afterwards at a cafe. Almost directly across the table from me was absolutely the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. She looked like a young Katherine Hepburn. She was about 22, and she just radiated beauty. I kept making wisecracks, calling her Katherine Hepburn. She seemed to like it. I didn’t expect anything to come of it. She was with a girlfriend. When it came time to leave I said to the museum director, a woman named Nana, at whose house I was staying, “I’m going to miss her. She was too good to believe.”

"She's coming home with us."

"I don't believe it."

... but later there she was, at Nana's place, in the bedroom with me. She had on a sheer nightgown, and she sat on the edge of the bed combing her very long hair and smiling at me. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Laura" she said.

"Well, look, Laura, I'm going to call you Katherine."

"All right," she said.

Her hair was reddish-brown and so very long. She was small but well proportioned. Her face was the most beautiful thing about her.

"Can I pour you a drink?" I asked.

"Oh no, I don't drink. I don't like it."

Actually, she frightened me. I couldn't understand what she was doing there with me. She didn't appear to be a groupie. I went to the bathroom, came back and turned out the light. I could feel her getting into bed next to me. I took her in my arms and we began kissing. I couldn't believe my luck. What right had I? How could a few books of poems call this forth? There was no way to understand it. I certainly was not about to reject it. I became very aroused. Suddenly she went down and took my cock in her mouth. I watched the slow movement of her head and body in the moonlight. She wasn't as good at it as some, but it was the very fact of her doing it that was amazing. Just as I was about to come I reached down and buried my hand in that mass of beautiful hair, pulling at it in the moonlight as I came in Katherine's mouth.

32

Lydia met me at the airport. She was horny as usual. "Jesus Christ," she said. "I'm hot! I play with myself but it doesn't do any good."

We were driving back to my place.

"Lydia, my leg is still in terrible shape. I just don't know if I can handle it with this leg."

"What?"

"It's true. I don't think I can fuck with my leg the way it is."

"What the hell good are you then?"

"Well, I can fry eggs and do magic tricks."

"Don't be funny. I'm asking you, what the hellgood are you?"

"The leg will heal. If it doesn't they'll cut if off. Be patient."

"If you hadn't been drunk you wouldn't have fallen and cut your leg. It's always the bottle!"

"It's not always the bottle, Lydia. We fuck about 4 times a week. For my age that's pretty good."

"Sometimes I think you don't even enjoy it."

"Lydia, sex isn't everything! You are obsessed. For Christ's sake, give it a rest."

"A rest until your leg heals? How am I going to make it meanwhile?"

"I'll play Scrabble with you."

Lydia screamed. The car began to swerve all over the street. "YOU SON-OF-A-BITCH! I'LL KILL YOU!"

She crossed the double yellow line at high speed, directly into oncoming traffic. Horns sounded and cars scattered. We drove on against the flow of traffic, cars approaching us peeling off to the left and right. Then just as abruptly Lydia swerved back across the double line into the lane we had just vacated.

Where are the police? I thought. Why is it that when Lydia does something the police become nonexistent?

"All right," she said. "I'm taking you home and that's it. I've had it. I'm going to sell my house and move to Phoenix. Glendoline lives in Phoenix now. My sisters warned me about living with an old fuck like you."

We drove the remainder of the way without talking. When we reached my place I took out my suitcase, looked at Lydia, said, "Goodbye." She was crying without making a sound, her whole face was wet. Suddenly she drove off toward Western Avenue. I walked into the court. Back from another reading… .

I checked the mail and then phoned Katherine who lived in Austin, Texas. She seemed truly glad to hear from me, and it was good to hear that Texas accent, that high laughter. I told her that I wanted her to come visit me, that I'd pay air fare both ways. We'd go to the racetrack, we'd go to Malibu, we'd … whatever she wanted. "But, Hank, don't you have a girlfriend?"

"No, none. I'm a recluse."

"But you're always writing about women in your poems."

"That's past. This is present."

"But what about Lydia?"

"Lydia?"

"Yes, you told me all about her."

"What did I tell you?"

"You told me how she beat up two other women. Would you let her beat me up? I'm not very big, you know."

"It can't happen. She's moved to Phoenix. I tell you, Katherine, you are the exceptional woman I've been looking for. Please, trust me."

"I'll have to make arrangements. I have to get somebody to take care of my cat."

"All right. But I want you to know that everything is clear here."

"But, Hank, don't forget what you told me about your women."

"Told you what?"

"You said, 'They always come back.'"

"That's just macho talk."

"I'll come," she said. "As soon as I get things straight here I'll make a reservation and let you know the details."

When I was in Texas Katherine had told me about her life. I was only the third man she had slept with. There had been her husband, an alcoholic track star, and me. Her ex-husband, Arnold, was into show business and the arts in some way. Exactly how it worked I didn't know. He was continually signing contracts with rock stars, painters and so forth. The business was $60,000 in debt, but flourishing. One of those situations where the further you were in debt the better off you were.

I don't know what happened to the track star. He just ran off, I guess. And then Arnold got on coke. The coke changed him overnight. Katherine said she didn't know him anymore. It was terrifying. Ambulance trips to hospitals. And then he'd be back at the office the next morning as if nothing had happened. Then Joanna Dover entered the picture. A tall, stately semi-millionairess. Educated and crazy. She and Arnold began to do business together. Joanna Dover dealt in the arts like some people deal in corn futures. She discovered unknown artists on the way up, bought their work cheap, and sold high after they became recognized. She had that kind of eye. And a magnificent 6-foot body. She began to see a lot of Arnold. One evening Joanna came to pick up Arnold dressed in an expensive tight-fitting gown. Then Katherine knew that Joanna really meant business. So, after that, she went along whenever Arnold and Joanna would go out. They were a trio. Arnold had a very low sex drive, so Katherine wasn't worried about that. She was worried about the business. Then Joanna dropped out of the picture, and Arnold got more and more into coke. More and more ambulance trips. Katherine finally divorced him. She still saw Arnold, however. She took coffee to the office at 10:30 every morning for the staff and Arnold put her on the payroll. Which enabled her to keep the house. She and Arnold had dinner there now and then, but no sex. Still, he needed her, she felt protective towards him. Katherine also believed in health foods and the only meat she ate was chicken and fish. She was a beautiful woman.

33

Within a day or two, about 1 pm in the afternoon there was a knock at my door. It was a painter, Monty Riff, or so he informed me. He also told me that I used to get drunk with him when I lived on DeLongpre Avenue.

"I don't remember you," I said.

"Dee Dee used to bring me over."

"Oh yeah? Well, come on in." Monty had a 6-pack with him and a tall stately woman.

"This is Joanna Dover," he introduced me to her.

"I missed your reading in Houston," she said.

"Laura Stanley told me all about you," I said.

"You know her?"

"Yes. But I've renamed her Katherine, after Katherine Hepburn."

"You really know her?"

"Fairly well."

"How well?"

"She's flying out to visit me in a day or two."

"Really?"

"Yes."

We finished the 6-pack and I left to go get some more. When I got back Monty was gone. Joanna told me that he had an appointment. We got to talking about painting and I brought out some of mine. She looked at them and decided that she'd like to buy two of them. "How much?" she asked.

"Well, $40 for the small one and $60 for the large one."

Joanna wrote me out a check for $100. Then she said, "I want you to live with me."

"What? This is pretty sudden."

"It would pay off. I have some money. Just don't ask me how much. I've been thinking of some reasons why we should live together. Do you want to hear them?"

"No."

"One thing, if we lived together I'd take you to Paris."

"I hate to travel."

"I'd show you a Paris you'd really like."

"Let me think it over."

I leaned over and gave her a kiss. Then I kissed her again, this time a little longer.

"Shit," I said, "let's go to bed."

"All right," said Joanna Dover.

We undressed and climbed in. She was 6 feet tall. I'd always had small women. It was strange—every place I reached there seemed to be more woman. We warmed up. I gave her 3 or 4 minutes of oral sex, then mounted. She was good, she was really good. We cleaned up, got dressed and then she took me to dinner in Malibu. She told me she lived in Galveston, Texas. She gave me her phone number, the address and told me to come and see her. I told her that I would. She told me that she was serious about Paris and the rest. It had been a good fuck and the dinner was excellent too.

34

The next day Katherine phoned me. She said she had the tickets and would be landing at L.A. International Friday at 2:30 pm.

"Katherine," I said, "there's something I've got to tell you."

"Hank, don't you want to see me?"

"I want to see you more than anybody I know."

"Then what is it?"

"Well, you know Joanna Dover …"

"Joanna Dover?"

"The one … you know … your husband …"

"What about her, Hank?"

"Well, she came to see me."

"You mean she came to your place?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"We talked. She bought two of my paintings."

"Anything else happen?"

"Yeah."

Katherine was quiet. Then she said, "Hank, I don't know if I want to see you now."

"I understand. Look, why don't you think it over and call me back? I'm sorry, Katherine. I'm sorry it happened. That's all I can say."

She hung up. She won't phone back, I thought. The best woman I ever met and I blew it. I deserve defeat, I deserve to die alone in a madhouse.

I sat by the telephone. I read the newspaper, the sports section, the financial section, the funny papers. The phone rang. It was Katherine. "FUCK Joanna Dover!" she laughed. I'd never heard Katherine swear like that before.

"Then you're coming?"

"Yes. Do you have the arrival time?"

“I have it all. I’ll be there.”

We said goodbye. Katherine was coming, she was coming for at least a week with that face, that body, that hair, those eyes, that laugh… .

35

I came out of the bar and checked the message board. The plane was on time. Katherine was in the air and moving towards me. I sat down and waited. Across from me was a well-groomed woman reading a paperback. Her dress was up around her thighs, showing all that flank, that leg wrapped in nylon. Why did she insist on doing that? I had a newspaper, and I looked over the top, up her dress. She had great thighs. Who was getting those thighs? I felt foolish staring up her dress, but I couldn't help myself. She was built. Once she had been a little girl, someday she would be dead, but now she was showing me her upper legs. The goddamned strumpet, I'd give her a hundred strokes, I'd give her 7-and-one-half inches of throbbing purple! She crossed her legs and her dress inched higher. She looked up from her paperback. Her eyes looked into mine as I watched over the top of the newspaper. Her expression was indifferent. She reached into her purse and took out a stick of gum, took the wrapper off and put the gum in her mouth. Green gum. She chewed on the green gum and I watched her mouth. She didn't pull her skirt down. She knew that I was looking. There was nothing I could do. I opened my wallet and took out 2 fifty dollar bills. She looked up, saw the bills, looked back down. Then a fat man plopped down next to me. His face was very red and he had a massive nose. He was dressed in a jumpsuit, a light brown jumpsuit. He farted. The lady pulled her dress down and I put the bills back in my wallet. My cock softened and I got up and went to the drinking fountain.

Out in the landing area Katherine's plane was taxiing toward the ramp. I stood and waited. Katherine, I adore you.

Katherine walked off the ramp, perfect, with red-brown hair, slim body, a blue dress clinging as she walked, white shoes, slim, neat ankles, youth. She wore a white hat with a wide brim, the brim turned down just right. Her eyes looked out from under the brim, large and brown and laughing. She had class. She'd never show her ass in an airport waiting area.

And there I was, 225 pounds, perpetually lost and confused, short legs, ape-like upper body, all chest, no neck, head too large, blurred eyes, hair uncombed, 6 feet of geek, waiting for her.

Katherine moved toward me. That long clean red-brown hair. Texas women were so relaxed, so natural. I gave her a kiss and asked about her baggage. I suggested a stop at the bar. The waitresses had on short red dresses that showed their ruffled white panties. The necklines of their dresses were cut low to show their breasts. They earned their salaries, they earned their tips, every cent. They lived in the suburbs and they hated men. They lived with their mothers and brothers and were in love with their psychiatrists.

We finished our drinks and went to get Katherine's baggage. A number of men tried to catch her eye, but she walked close by my side, holding my arm. Few beautiful women were willing to indicate in public that they belonged to someone. I had known enough women to realize this. I accepted them for what they were, and love came hard and very seldom. When it did it was usually for the wrong reasons. One simply became tired of holding love back and let it go because it needed some place to go. Then usually, there was trouble.

At my place Katherine opened her suitcase and took out a pair of rubber gloves. She laughed.

"What is this?" I asked.

"Darlene—my best friend—she saw me packing and she said, 'What the hell are you doing?' And I said, I've never seen Hank's place, but I know that before I can cook in it and live in it and sleep in it I've got to clean it up!'"

Then Katherine gave off that happy Texas laugh. She went into the bathroom and put on a pair of bluejeans and an orange blouse, came out barefooted and went into the kitchen with her rubber gloves.

I went into the bathroom and changed clothes also. I decided that if Lydia came by I'd never let her touch Katherine. Lydia? Where was she? What was she doing?

I sent up a little prayer to the gods who watched over me: please keep Lydia away. Let her suck on the horns of cowboys and dance until 3 am—but please keep her away… .

When I came out Katherine was on her knees scrubbing at two years' worth of grease on my kitchen floor.

"Katherine," I said, "let's go out on the town. Let's go have dinner. This is no way to begin."

"All right, Hank, but I've got to finish this floor first. Then we'll go."

I sat and waited. Then she came out and I was sitting in a chair, waiting. She bent over and kissed me, laughing, "You are a dirty old man!" Then she walked into the bedroom. I was in love again, I was in trouble… .

36

After dinner we came back and we talked. She was a health food addict and didn't eat meat except for chicken and fish. It certainly worked for her.

"Hank," she said, "tomorrow I'm going to clean your bathroom."

"All right," I said over my drink.

"And I must do my exercises every day. Will that bother you?"

"No, no."

"Will you be able to write while I'm fussing around here?"

"No problem."

"I can go for walks."

"No, not alone, not in this neighborhood."

"I don't want to interfere with your writing."

"There's no way I can stop writing, it's a form of insanity."

Katherine came over and sat by me on the couch. She seemed more a girl than a woman. I put down my drink and kissed her, a long, slow kiss. Her lips were cool and soft. I was very conscious of her long red-brown hair. I pulled away and had another drink. She confused me. I was used to vile drunken wenches.

We talked for another hour. "Let's go to sleep," I told her, "I'm tired."

"Fine. I'll get ready first," she said.

I sat drinking. I needed more to drink. She simply was too much.

"Hank," she said, "I'm in bed."

"All right."

I went into the bathroom and undressed, brushed my teeth, washed my face and hands. She came all the way from Texas, I thought, she came on a plane just to see me and now she's in my bed, waiting.

I didn't have any pyjamas. I walked toward the bed. She was in a nightie. "Hank," she said, "we have about 6 days when it's safe, then we'll have to think of something else."

I got into bed with her. The little girl-woman was ready. I pulled her towards me. Luck was mine again, the gods were smiling. The kisses became more intense. I placed her hand on my cock and then pulled up her nightie. I began to play with her cunt. Katherine with a cunt? The clit came out and I touched it gently, again and again. Finally, I mounted. My cock entered halfway. It was very tight. I moved it back and forth, then pushed. The remainder of my cock slid in. It was glorious. She gripped me. I moved and her grip held. I tried to control myself. I stopped stroking and waited to cool off. I kissed her, working her lips apart, sucking at the upper lip. I saw her hair spread wide across the pillow. Then I gave up trying to please her and simply fucked her, ripping viciously. It was like murder. I didn't care; my cock had gone crazy. All that hair, her young and beautiful face. It was like raping the Virgin Mary. I came. I came inside of her, agonizing, feeling my sperm enter her body, she was helpless, and I shot my come deep into her ultimate core—body and soul—again and again… .

Later on, we slept. Or Katherine slept. I held her from the back. For the first time I thought of marriage. I knew that there certainly were flaws in her that had not surfaced. The beginning of a relationship was always the easiest. After that the unveiling began, never to stop. Still, I thought of marriage. I thought of a house, a dog and a cat, of shopping in supermarkets. Henry Chinaski was losing his balls. And didn't care.

At last I slept. When I awakened in the morning Katherine was sitting on the edge of the bed brushing those yards of red-brown hair. Her large dark eyes looked at me as I awakened. "Hello, Katherine," I said, "will you marry me?"

"Please don't," she said, "I don't like it."

"I mean it."

"Oh, shit, Hank!"

"What?"

"I said, 'shit,' and if you talk that way I'm taking the first plane out."

"All right."

"Hank?"

"Yes?"

I looked at Katherine. She kept brushing her long hair. Her large brown eyes looked at me, and she was smiling. She said, "It's just sex, Hank, it's just sex!" Then she laughed. It wasn't a sardonic laugh, it was really joyful. She brushed her hair and I put my arm around her waist and rested my head against her leg. I wasn't quite sure of anything.

37

I took women either to the boxing matches or to the racetrack. That Thursday night I took Katherine to the boxing matches at the Olympic auditorium. She had never been to a live fight. We got there before the first bout and sat at ringside. I drank beer and smoked and waited.

"It's strange," I told her, "that people will sit here and wait for two men to climb up there into that ring and try to punch each other out."

"It does seem awful."

"This place was built a long time ago," I told her as she looked around the ancient arena. "There are only two restrooms, one for men, the other for women, and they are small. So try to go before or after intermission."

"All right."

The Olympic was attended mostly by Latinos and lower class working whites, with a few movie stars and celebrities. There were many good Mexican fighters and they fought with their hearts. The only bad fights were when whites or blacks fought, especially the heavyweights.

Being there with Katherine felt strange. Human relationships were strange. I mean, you were with one person a while, eating and sleeping and living with them, loving them, talking to them, going places together, and then it stopped. Then there was a short period when you weren't with anybody, then another woman arrived, and you ate with her and fucked her, and it all seemed so normal, as if you had been waiting just for her and she had been waiting for you. I never felt right being alone; sometimes it felt good but it never felt right.

The first fight was a good one, lots of blood and courage. There was something to be learned about writing from watching boxing matches or going to the racetrack. The message wasn't clear but it helped me. That was the important part: the message wasn't clear. It was wordless, like a house burning, or an earthquake or a flood, or a woman getting out of a car, showing her legs. I didn't know what other writers needed; I didn't care, I couldn't read them anyway. I was locked into my own habits, my own prejudices. It wasn't bad being dumb if the ignorance was all your own. I knew that some day I would write about Katherine and that it would be hard. It was easy to write about whores, but to write about a good woman was much more difficult.

The second fight was good, too. The crowd screamed and roared and swilled beer. They had temporarily escaped the factories, the warehouses, the slaughterhouses, the car washes — they'd be back in captivity the next day but now they were out—they were wild with freedom. They weren't thinking about the slavery of poverty. Or the slavery of welfare and food stamps. The rest of us would be all right until the poor learned how to make atom bombs in their basements.

All the fights were good. I got up and went to the restroom. When I got back Katherine was very still. She looked more like she should be attending a ballet or a concert. She looked so delicate and yet she was such a marvelous fuck.

I kept drinking and Katherine would grab one of my hands when a fight became exceptionally brutal. The crowd loved knockouts. They screamed when one of the fighters was on the way out. They were landing those punches. Maybe they were punching out their bosses or their wives. Who knew? Who cared? More beer.

I suggested to Katherine that we leave before the final bout. I'd had enough.

"All right," she said.

We walked up the narrow aisle, the air blue with smoke. There was no whistling, no obscene gestures. My scarred and battered face was sometimes an asset.

We walked back to the small parking lot under the freeway. The '67 blue Volks was not there. The '67 model was the last good Volks—and the young men knew it.

“Hepburn, they stole our fucking car.”

“Oh Hank, surely not!”

“It’s gone. It was sitting there.” I pointed. “Now it’s gone.”

“Hank, what will we do?”

“We’ll take a taxi. I really feel bad.”

“Why do people do that?”

“They have to. It’s their way out.”

We went into a coffee shop and I phoned for a cab. We ordered coffee and doughnuts. While we had been watching the fights they had pulled the coathanger and hotwire trick. I had a saying, “Take my woman, but leave my car alone.” I would never kill a man who took my woman; I might kill a man who took my car.

The cab came. At my place, luckily, there was beer and some vodka. I had given up all hope of staying sober enough to make love. Katherine knew it. I paced up and down talking about my ‘67 blue Volks. The last good model. I couldn’t even call the police. I was too drunk. I’d have to wait until morning, until noon.

“Hepburn,” I told her, “it’s not your fault, you didn’t steal it!”

“I wish I had, you’d have it now.”

I thought of 2 or 3 young kids racing my blue baby down along the Coast Highway, smoking dope, laughing, opening it up. Then I thought of all the junkyards along Santa Fe Avenue. Mountains of bumpers, windshields, doorhandles, wiper motors, engine parts, tires, wheels, hoods, jacks, bucket seats, front wheel bearings, brake shoes, radios, pistons, valves, carburetors, cam shafts, transmissions, axles—my car soon would be just a pile of accessories.

That night I slept up against Katherine, but my heart was sad and cold.

38

Luckily I had auto insurance that paid for a rental car. I drove Katherine to the racetrack in it. We sat in the sundeck at Hollywood Park near the stretch turn. Katherine said she didn't want to bet but I took her inside and showed her the toteboard and the betting windows.

I put 5 win on a 7 to 2 shot with early lick, my favorite kind of horse. I always figured if you're going to lose you might as well lose in front; you had the race won until somebody beat you. The horse went wire to wire, pulling away at the end. It paid $9.40 and I was $17.50 ahead.

The next race she remained in her seat while I went to make my bet. When I came back she pointed to a man two rows below us. "See that man there?"

"Yes."

"He told me he won $2,000 yesterday and that he's $25,000 ahead for the meet."

"Don't you want to bet? Maybe we all can win."

"Oh no, I don't know anything about it."

"It's simple: you give them a dollar and they give you 84 cents back. It's called the 'take.' The state and the track split it about even. They don't care who wins the race, their take is out of the total mutual pool."

In the second race my horse, the 8 to 5 favorite, ran second. A longshot had nosed me at the wire. It paid $45.80.

The man two rows down turned and looked at Katherine. "I had it," he told her, "I had ten on the nose."

"Oooh," she told him, smiling, "that's good."

I turned to the third race, an affair for 2-year-old maiden colts and geldings. At 5 minutes to post I checked the tote and went to bet. As I walked away I saw the man two rows down turn and begin talking to Katherine. There were at least a dozen of them at the track every day, who told attractive women what big winners they were, hoping that somehow they would end up in bed with them. Maybe they didn't even think that far; maybe they only hoped vaguely for something without being quite sure what it was. They were addled and dizzied, taking the 10-count. Who could hate them? Big winners, but if you watched them bet, they were usually at the 2 dollar window, their shoes down at the heels and their clothing dirty. The lowest of the breed.

I took the even money shot and he won by 6 and paid $4.00. Not much, but I had him ten win. The man turned around and looked at Katherine. "I had it," he told her. "$100 to win."

Katherine didn't answer. She was beginning to understand. Winners didn't shoot off their mouths. They were afraid of getting murdered in the parking lot.

After the fourth race, a $22.80 winner, he turned again and told Katherine, "I had that one, ten across."

She turned away. "His face is yellow, Hank. Did you see his eyes? He's sick."

"He's sick on the dream. We're all sick on the dream, that's why we're out here."

"Hank, let's go."

"All right."

That night she drank half a bottle of red wine, good red wine, and she was sad and quiet. I knew she was connecting me with the racetrack people and the boxing crowd, and it was true, I was with them, I was one of them. Katherine knew that there was something about me that was not wholesome in the sense of wholesome is as wholesome does. I was drawn to all the wrong things: I liked to drink, I was lazy, I didn't have a god, politics, ideas, ideals. I was settled into nothingness; a kind of non-being, and I accepted it. It didn't make for an interesting person. I didn't want to be interesting, it was too hard. What I really wanted was only a soft, hazy space to live in, and to be left alone. On the other hand, when I got drunk I screamed, went crazy, got all out of hand. One kind of behavior didn't fit the other. I didn't care.

The fucking was very good that night, but it was the night I lost her. There was nothing I could do about it. I rolled off and wiped myself on the sheet as she went into the bathroom. Overhead a police helicopter circled over Hollywood.

39

The next night Bobby and Valerie came over. They had recently moved into my apartment building and now lived across the court. Bobby had on his tight knit shirt. Everything always fitted Bobby perfectly, his pants were snug and just the right length, he wore the right shoes and his hair was styled. Valerie also dressed mod but not quite as consciously. People called them the "Barbie Dolls." Valerie was all right when you got her alone, she was intelligent and very energetic and damned honest. Bobby, too, was more human when he and I were alone, but when a new woman was around he became very dull and obvious. He would direct all his attention and conversation to the woman, as if his very presence was an interesting and marvelous thing, but his conversation became predictable and dull. I wondered how Katherine would handle him.

They sat down. I was in a chair near the window and Valerie sat between Bobby and Katherine on the couch. Bobby began. He bent forward and ignoring Valerie directed his attention to Katherine.

"Do you like Los Angeles?" he asked.

"It's all right," answered Katherine.

"Are you going to stay here much longer?"

"A while longer."

"You're from Texas?"

"Yes."

"Are your parents from Texas?"

"Yes."

"Anything good on t.v. out there?"

"It's about the same."

"I've got an uncle in Texas."

"Oh."

"Yes, he lives in Dallas."

Katherine didn’t answer. Then she said, “Excuse me, I’m going to make a sandwich. Does anybody want anything?”

We said we didn’t. Katherine got up and went into the kitchen. Bobby got up and followed her. You couldn’t quite hear his words, but you could tell that he was asking more questions. Valerie stared at the floor. Katherine and Bobby were in the kitchen a long time. Suddenly Valerie raised her head and began talking to me. She spoke very rapidly and nervously.

“Valerie,” I stopped her, “we needn’t talk, we don’t have to talk.”

She put her head down again.

Then I said, “Hey, you guys have been in there a long time. Are you waxing the floor?”

Bobby laughed and began tapping his foot in rhythm on the floor.

Finally Katherine came out followed by Bobby. She walked over to me and showed me her sandwich: peanut butter on cracked wheat with sliced bananas and sesame seeds.

“It looks good,” I told her.

She sat down and began eating her sandwich. It became quiet. It remained quiet. Then Bobby said, “Well, I think we’d better go… .”

They left. After the door closed Katherine looked at me and said, “Don’t think anything, Hank. He was just trying to impress me.”

“He’s done that with every woman I’ve known since I’ve known him.”

The phone rang. It was Bobby. “Hey, man, what have you done to my wife?”

“What’s the matter?”

“She just sits here, she’s completely depressed, she won’t talk!”

“I haven’t done anything to your wife.”

“I don’t understand it!”

“Goodnight, Bobby.”

I hung up.

“It was Bobby,” I told Katherine. “His wife is depressed.”

"Really?"
"It seems so."
"Are you sure you don't want a sandwich?"
"Can you make me one just like yours?"
"Oh, yes."
"I'll take it."

40

Katherine stayed 4 or 5 more days. We had reached the time of the month when it was risky for Katherine to fuck. I couldn't stand rubbers. Katherine got some contraceptive foam. Meanwhile, the police had recovered my Volks. We went down to where it was impounded. It was intact and in good shape except for a dead battery. I had it hauled to a Hollywood garage where they put it in order. After a last goodbye in bed I drove Katherine to the airport in the blue Volks, TRV 469.

It wasn't a happy day for me. We sat not saying much. Then they called her flight and we kissed.

"Hey, they all saw this young girl kissing this old man."

"I don't give a damn… ."

Katherine kissed me again.

"You're going to miss your flight," I said.

"Come see me, Hank. I have a nice house. I live alone. Come see me."

"I will."

"Write!"

"I will… ."

Katherine walked into the boarding tunnel and was gone.

I walked back to the parking lot, got in the Volks, thinking, I've still got this. What the hell, I haven't lost everything.

It started.

41

That evening I started drinking. It wasn't going to be easy without Katherine. I found some things she had left behind—earrings, a bracelet.

I've got to get back to the typewriter, I thought. Art takes discipline. Any asshole can chase a skirt. I drank, thinking about it.

At 2:10 am the phone rang. I was drinking my last beer.

"Hello?"

"Hello." It was a woman's voice, a young woman.

"Yes?"

"Are you Henry Chinaski?"

"Yes."

"My girlfriend admires your writing. It's her birthday and I told her I'd phone you. We were surprised to find you in the phonebook."

"I'm listed."

"Well, it's her birthday and I thought it might be nice if we could come to see you."

"All right."

"I told Arlene that you probably had women all over the place."

"I'm a recluse."

"Then it's all right if we come over?"

I gave them the address and directions.

"Only one thing, I'm out of beer."

"We'll get you some beer. My name's Tammie."

"It's after 2 am."

"We'll get some beer. Cleavage can work wonders."

They arrived in 20 minutes with the cleavage but without the beer.

"That son-of-a-bitch," said Arlene. "He always gave it to us before. This time he seemed scared."

“Fuck him,” said Tammie.

They both sat down and announced their ages.

“I’m 32,” said Arlene.

“I’m 23,” said Tammie.

“Add your ages together,” I said, “and you’ve got me.”

Arlene’s hair was long and black. She sat in the chair by the window combing her hair, making up her face, looking into a large silver mirror, and talking. She was obviously high on pills. Tammie had a near-perfect body and long natural red hair. She was on pills too, but wasn’t as high.

“It will cost you $100 for a piece of ass,” Tammie told me.

“I’ll pass.”

Tammie was hard like so many women in their early twenties. Her face was shark-like. I disliked her, right off.

They left around 3:30 am and I went to bed alone.

42

Two mornings later, at 4 am, somebody beat on the door.

"Who is it?"

"It's a redheaded floozie."

I let Tammie in. She sat down and I opened a couple of beers.

"I've got bad breath, I have these two bad teeth. You can't kiss me."

"All right."

We talked. Well, I listened. Tammie was on speed. I listened and looked at her long red hair and when she was preoccupied I looked and looked at that body. It was bursting out of her clothing, begging to get out. She talked on and on. I didn't touch her.

At 6 am Tammie gave me her address and phone number.

"I've got to go," she said.

"I'll walk you to your car."

It was a bright red Camaro, completely wrecked. The front was smashed in, one side was ripped open and the windows were gone. Inside were rags and shirts and Kleenex boxes and newspapers and milk cartons and Coke bottles and wire and rope and paper napkins and magazines and paper cups and shoes and bent colored drinking straws. This mass of stuff was piled above seat level and covered the seats. Only the driver's area had a little clear space.

Tammie stuck her head out the window and we kissed.

Then she tore away from the curb and by the time she reached the corner she was doing 45. She did hit the brakes and the Camaro bobbed up and down, up and down. I walked back inside.

I went to bed and thought about her hair. I'd never known a real redhead. It was fire.

Like lightning from heaven, I thought.

Somehow her face didn't seem to be as hard anymore… .

43

I phoned her. It was 1 am. I went over.

Tammie lived in a small bungalow behind a house.

She let me in.

"Be quiet. Don't wake Dancy. She's my daughter. She's 6 years old and she's asleep in the bedroom."

I had a 6-pack of beer. Tammie put it in the refrigerator and came out with two bottles.

"My daughter mustn't see anything. I still have the two bad teeth which makes my breath bad. We can't kiss."

"All right."

The bedroom door was closed.

"Look," she said, "I've got to take some vitamin B. And I'm going to have to pull my pants down and stab myself in the ass. Look the other way."

"All right."

I watched her draw liquid into the syringe. I looked the other way.

"I've got to get it all," she said.

When it was done she turned on a small red radio.

"Nice place you got here."

"I'm a month behind on the rent."

"Oh …"

"It's all right. The landlord—he lives in the place up front—I can hold him off."

"Good."

"He's married, the old fuck. And guess what?"

"I can't."

"The other day his wife was gone somewhere and the old fuck asked me to come over. I went over and sat down and guess what?"

"He pulled it out."

"No, he put on dirty movies. He thought that shit would turn me on."

"It didn't?"

"I said, 'Mr. Miller, I have to leave now. I have to pick Dancy up at school.'"

Tammie gave me an upper. We talked and talked. And drank beer.

At 6 am Tammie opened the couch we had been sitting on. There was a blanket. We took off our shoes and climbed under the blanket with our clothes on. I held her from the back, my face in all that red hair. I got hard. I dug it into her from behind, through her clothing. I heard her fingers clawing and digging into the edge of the couch.

"I've got to go," I told Tammie.

"Listen, all I've got to do is to make Dancy some breakfast and drive her to school. It's O.K. if she sees you. Just wait here until I get back."

"I'm going," I said.

I drove home, drunk. The sun was really up, painful and yellow… .

44

I had been sleeping on a terrible mattress with the springs sticking into me for several years. That afternoon when I awakened I pulled the mattress off the bed, dragged it outside, and leaned it against the trashbin.

I walked back in and left the door open.

It was 2 pm and hot.

Tammie walked in and sat on the couch.

“I’ve got to go,” I told her. “I’ve got to go buy a mattress.”

“A mattress? Well, I’ll leave.”

“No, Tammie, wait. Please. The whole thing will take about 15 minutes. Wait here and have a beer.”

“All right,” she said… .

There was a rebuilt mattress shop about three blocks down on Western. I parked in front and ran through the door. “Fellows! I need a mattress … FAST!”

“What kind of bed?”

“Double.”

“We’ve got this one for $35.”

“I’ll take it.”

“Can you take it in your car?”

“I’ve got a Volks.”

“All right, we’ll deliver it. Address?”

Tammie was still there when I got back.

“Where’s the mattress?”

“It’ll be along. Have another beer. You got a pill?”

She gave me a pill. The light shot through her red hair.

Tammie had been voted Miss Sunny Bunny at the Orange County Fair in 1973. It was four years later now, but she still had it. She was big and ripe in all the right places.

The delivery man was at the door with the mattress.

“Let me help you.”

The delivery man was a good soul. He helped me put it on the bed. Then he saw Tammie sitting on the couch. He grinned. “Hi,” he said to her.

“Thanks very much,” I told him. I gave him 3 dollars and he left.

I went into the bedroom and looked at the mattress. Tammie followed. The mattress was wrapped in cellophane. I began ripping it off. Tammie helped.

“Look at it. It’s pretty,” she said.

“Yes, it is.”

It was bright and colorful. Roses, stems, leaves, curling vines. It looked like the Garden of Eden, and for $35.

Tammie looked at it. “That mattress turns me on. I want to break it in. I want to be the first woman to fuck you on that mattress.”

“I wonder who will be the second?”

Tammie walked into the bathroom. There was a silence. Then I heard the shower. I put on fresh sheets and pillow cases, undressed and climbed in. Tammie came out, young and wet, she sparkled. Her pubic hair was the same color as the hair on her head: red, like fire.

She paused before the mirror and pulled in her stomach. Those huge breasts rose toward the glass. I could see her, back and front, simultaneously.

She walked over and climbed under the sheet.

We slowly worked into it.

We got into it, all that red hair on the pillow, as outside the sirens howled and the dogs barked.

45

Tammie came by that night. She appeared to be high on uppers.

"I want some champagne," she said.

"All right," I said.

I handed her a twenty.

"Be right back," she said, walking out the door.

Then the phone rang. It was Lydia. "I just wondered how you were doing. …"

"Things are all right."

"Not here. I'm pregnant."

"What?"

"And I don't know who the father is."

"Oh?"

"You know Dutch, the guy who hangs around the bar where I'm working now?"

"Yes, old Baldy."

"Well, he's really a nice guy. He's in love with me. He brings me flowers and candy. He wants to marry me. He's been real nice. And one night I went home with him. We did it."

"All right."

"Then there's Barney, he's married but I like him. Of all the guys in the bar he's the only one who never tried to put the make on me. It fascinated me. Well, you know, I'm trying to sell my house. So he came over one afternoon. He just came by. He said he wanted to look the house over for a friend of his. I let him in. Well, he came at just the right time. The kids were in school so I let him go ahead… . Then one night this stranger came into the bar late. He asked me togo home with him. I told him no. Then he said he just wanted to sit in my car with me, talk to me. I said all right. We sat in the car and talked. Then we shared a joint. Then he "kissed me. That kiss did it. If he hadn't kissed me I wouldn't have done it. Now I'm pregnant and I don't know who. I'll have to wait and see who the child looks like."

"All right, Lydia, lots of luck."

"Thanks."

I hung up. A minute passed and then the phone rang again. It was Lydia. "Oh," she said, "I wondered how you were doing?"

"About the same, horses and booze."

"Then everything's all right with you?"

"Not quite."

"What is it?"

"Well, I sent this woman out for champagne… ."

"Woman?"

"Well, girl, really …"

"A girl?"

"I sent her out with $20 for champagne and she hasn't come back. I think I've been taken."

"Chinaski, I don't want to hear about your women. Do you understand that?"

"All right."

Lydia hung up. There was a knock on the door. It was Tammie. She'd come back with the champagne and the change.

46

It was noon the next day when the phone rang. It was Lydia again.

"Well, did she come back with the champagne?"

"Who?"

"Your whore."

"Yes, she came back. …"

"Then what happened?"

"We drank the champagne. It was good stuff."

"Then what happened?"

"Well, you know, shit …"

I heard a long insane wail like a wolverine shot in the arctic snow and left to bleed and die alone… .

She hung up.

I slept most of the afternoon and that night I drove out to the harness races.

I lost $32, got into the Volks and drove back. I parked, walked up on the porch and put the key into the door. All the lights were on. I looked around. Drawers were ripped out and overturned on the floor, the bed covers were on the floor. All my books were missing from the bookcase, including the books I had written, 20 or so. And my typewriter was gone and my toaster was gone and my radio was gone and my paintings were gone.

Lydia, I thought.

All she'd left me was my t.v. because she knew I never looked at it.

I walked outside and there was Lydia's car, but she wasn't in it.

"Lydia," I said. "Hey, baby!"

I walked up and down the street and then I saw her feet, both of them, sticking out from behind a small tree up against an apartment house wall. I walked up to the tree and said, "Look, what the hell's the matter with you?"

Lydia just stood there. She had two shopping bags full of my books and a portfolio of my paintings.

"Look, I've got to have my books and paintings back. They belong to me."

Lydia came out from behind the tree—screaming. She took the paintings out and started tearing them. She threw the pieces in the air and when they fell to the ground she stomped on them. She was wearing her cowgirl boots.

Then she took my books out of the shopping bags and started throwing them around, out into the street, out on the lawn, everywhere.

"Here are your paintings! Here are your books! AND DON'T TELL ME ABOUT YOUR WOMEN! DON'T TELL ME ABOUT YOUR WOMEN!"

Then Lydia ran down to my court with a book in her hand, my latest, The Selected Works of Henry Chinaski. She screamed, "So you want your books back? So you want your books back? Here are your goddamned books! AND DON'T TELL ME ABOUT YOUR WOMEN!"

She started smashing the glass panes in my front door. She took The Selected Works of Henry Chinaski and smashed pane after pane, screaming, "You want your books back? Here are your goddamned books! AND DON'T TELL ME ABOUT YOUR WOMEN! I DON'T WANT TO HEAR ABOUT YOUR WOMEN!"

I stood there as she screamed and broke glass.

Where are the police? I thought. Where?

Then Lydia ran down the court walk, took a quick left at the trash bin and ran down the driveway of the apartment house next door. Behind a small bush was my typewriter, my radio and my toaster.

Lydia picked up the typewriter and ran out into the center of the street with it. It was a heavy old-fashioned standard machine. Lydia lifted the typer high over her head with both hands and smashed it in the street. The platen and several other parts flew off. She picked the typer up again, raised it over her head and screamed, “DON’T TELL ME ABOUT YOUR WOMEN!” and smashed it into the street again.

Then Lydia jumped into her car and drove off. Fifteen seconds later the police cruiser drove up. “It’s an orange Volks. It’s called the Thing, looks like a tank. I don’t remember the license number, but the letters are HZY, like HAZY, got it?”

“Address?”

I gave them her address… .

Sure enough, they brought her back. I heard her in the back seat, wailing, as they drove up.

“STAND BACK!” said one cop as he jumped out. He followed me up to my place. He walked inside and stepped on some broken glass. For some reason he shone his flashlight on the ceiling and the ceiling mouldings.

“You want to press charges?” the cop asked me.

“No. She has children. I don’t want her to lose her kids. Her ex-husband is trying to get them from her. But please tell her that people aren’t supposed to go around doing this sort of thing.”

“O.K.,” he said, “now sign this.”

He wrote it down in hand in a little notebook with lined paper. It said that I, Henry Chinaski, would not press charges against one Lydia Vance.

I signed it and he left.

I locked what was left of the door and went to bed and tried to sleep.

In an hour or so the phone rang. It was Lydia. She was back home.

“YOU-SON-OF-A-BITCH, YOU EVER TELL ME ABOUT YOUR WOMEN AGAIN AND I’LL DO THE SAME THING ALL OVER AGAIN!”

She hung up.

47

Two nights later I went over to Tammie's place on Rustic Court. I knocked. The lights weren't on. It seemed empty. I looked in her mailbox. There were letters in there. I wrote a note, "Tammie, I have been trying to phone you. I came over and you weren't in. Are you all right? Phone me… . Hank."

I drove over at 11 am the next morning. Her car wasn't out front. My note was still stuck in the door. I rang anyhow. The letters were still in the mailbox. I left a note in the mailbox: "Tammie, where the hell are you? Contact me… . Hank."

I drove all over the neighborhood looking for that smashed red Camaro.

I returned that night. It was raining. My notes were wet. There was more mail in the box. I left her a book of my poems, inscribed. Then I went back to my Volks. I had a Maltese cross hanging from my rearview mirror. I cut the cross down, took it back to her place and tied it around her doorknob.

I didn't know where any of her friends lived, where her mother lived, where her lovers lived.

I went back to my court and wrote some love poems.

48

I was sitting with an anarchist from Beverly Hills, Ben Solvnag, who was writing my biography when I heard her footsteps on the court walk. I knew the sound—they were always fast and frantic and sexy—those tiny feet. I lived near the rear of the court. My door was open. Tammie ran in.

We were both into each other's arms, hugging and kissing.

Ben Solvnag said goodbye and was gone.

"Those sons of bitches confiscated my stuff, all my stuff! I couldn't make the rent! That dirty son-of-a-bitch!"

"I'll go over there and kick his ass. We'll get your stuff back."

"No, he has guns! All kinds of guns!"

"Oh."

"My daughter is at my mother's."

"How about something to drink?"

"Sure."

"What?"

"Extra dry champagne."

"O.K."

The door was still open and the afternoon sunlight came in through her hair—it was so long and so red it burned. "Can I take a bath?" she asked. "Of course." "Wait for me," she said.

In the morning we talked about her finances. She had money coming in: child support plus a couple of unemployment checks with more to come.

"There's a vacancy in the place in back, right above me."

"How much is it?"

"$105 with half of the utilities paid."

"Oh hell, I can make that. Do they take children? A child?"

"They will. I've got pull. I know the managers."

By Sunday she was moved in. She was right above me. She could look into my kitchen where I typed my things on the breakfast nook table.

49

That Tuesday night we were sitting at my place drinking; Tammie, me and her brother, Jay. The phone rang. It was Bobby. "Louie and his wife are down here and she'd like to meet you." Louie was the one who had just vacated Tammie's place. He played in jazz groups at small clubs and wasn't having much luck.

But he was an interesting sort.

"I'd rather just forget it, Bobby."

"Louie will be hurt if you don't come down here."

"O.K., Bobby, but I'm bringing a couple of friends."

We went down and the introductions went around. Then Bobby brought out some of his bargain beer. There was stereo music going, and it was loud.

"I read your story in Knight," said Louie. "It was a strange one. You've never fucked a dead woman, have you?"

"It just seemed like some of them were dead."

"I know what you mean."

"I hate that music," said Tammie.

"How is the music going, Louie?"

"Well, I've got a new group now. If we can hang together long enough we might make it."

"I think I'll suck somebody off," said Tammie, "I think I'll suck off Bobby, I think I'll suck off Louie, I think I'll suck off my brother!"

Tammie was dressed in a long outfit that looked something like an evening dress and something like a nightgown.

Valerie, Bobby's wife, was at work. She worked two nights a week as a barmaid. Louie and his wife, Paula, and Bobby had been drinking for some time.

Louie took a gulp of the bargain beer, started to get sick, jumped up and ran out the front door. Tammie jumped up and ran out the door after him. After a bit they both walked in together.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Louie said to Paula.

"All right," she said.

They got up and left together.

Bobby got out some more beer. Jay and I talked about something. Then I heard Bobby: "Don't blame me! Hey, man, don't blame me!"

I looked. Tammie had her head in Bobby's lap and she had her hand on his balls and then she moved it up and grabbed his cock and held his cock, and all the time her eyes looked directly at me.

I took a hit of my beer, put it down, got up and walked out.

50

I saw Bobby out front the next day when I went to buy a newspaper. “Louie phoned,” he said, “he told me what happened to him.”

“Yeah?”

“He ran outside to vomit and Tammie grabbed his cock while he was vomiting and she said, ‘Come on upstairs and I’ll suck you off. Then we’ll stick your dick in an Easter egg.’ He told her ‘No’

and she said, ‘What’s the matter? Aren’t you a man? Can’t you hold your liquor? Come upstairs and I’ll suck you off!’”

I went down to the corner and bought the newspaper. I came back and checked the race results, read about the knifings, the rapes, the murders.

There was a knock. I opened the door. It was Tammie. She came in and sat down.

“Look,” she said, “I’m sorry if I hurt you acting like I did, but that’s all I’m sorry for. The rest of it is just me.”

“That’s all right,” I said, “but you hurt Paula too when you ran out the door after Louie. They’re together, you know.”

“SHIT!” she screamed at me, “I DON’T KNOW PAULA FROM ADAM!”

51

That night I took Tammie to the harness races. We went upstairs to the second deck and sat down. I brought her a program and she stared at it a while. (At the harness races, past performance charts are printed in the program.) "Look," she said, "I'm on pills. And when I'm on pills I sometimes get spaced and I get lost. Keep your eye on me."

"All right. I've got to bet. You want a few bucks to bet with?"

"No."

"All right, I'll be right back."

I walked to the windows and bet 5 win on the 7 horse.

When I got back Tammie wasn't there. She's just gone to the ladies' room, I thought.

I sat and watched the race. The 7 horse came in at 5 to one. I was 25 bucks up.

Tammie still wasn't back. The horses came out for the next race. I decided not to bet. I decided to look for Tammie.

First I walked to the upper deck and checked the grandstand, all the aisles, the concession stands, the bar. I couldn't find her.

The second race started and they went around. I heard the players screaming during the stretch run as I walked down to the ground floor. I looked all round for that marvelous body and that red hair. I couldn't find her.

I walked down to Emergency First Aid. A man was sitting in there smoking a cigar. I asked him, "Do you have a young redhead in there? Maybe she fainted … she's been sick."

"I don't have any redheads in here, sir."

My feet were tired. I went back to the second deck and began thinking about the next race.

By the end of the eighth race I was $132 ahead. I was going to bet 50 win on the 4 horse in the last race. I got up to bet and then I saw Tammie standing in the doorway of a maintenance room. She was standing between a black janitor with a broom and another black man who was very well dressed. He looked like a movie pimp. Tammie grinned and waved at me.

I walked over. "I was looking for you. I thought maybe you'd o.d.'d."

"No, I'm all right, I'm fine."

"Well, that's good. Goodnight, Red… ."

I walked off toward the betting window. I heard her running behind me. "Hey, where the hell you going?"

"I want to get it down on the 4 horse."

I got it down. The 4 lost by a nose. The races were over. Tammie and I walked out to the parking lot together. Her hip bounced against me as we walked.

"You had me worried," I said.

We found the car and got in. Tammie smoked 6 or 7 cigarettes on the way back, smoking them part way, then bending them out in the ashtray. She turned on the radio. She turned the sound up and down, changed stations and snapped her fingers to the music.

When we got to the court she ran to her place and locked the door.

52

Bobby's wife worked two nights a week and when she was gone he got on the telephone. I knew that on Tuesday and Thursday nights he would be lonely.

It was Tuesday night when the phone rang. It was Bobby. "Hey, man, mind if I come down and have a few beers?"

"All right, Bobby."

I was sitting in a chair across from Tammie who was on the couch. Bobby came in and sat on the couch. I opened him a beer. Bobby sat and talked to Tammie. The conversation was so inane that I tuned out. But some of it seeped through.

"In the morning," Bobby said, "I take a cold shower. It really wakes me up."

"I take a cold shower in the morning too," said Tammie.

"I take a cold shower and then I towel myself off," Bobby continued, "then I read a magazine or something. Then I'm ready for the day."

"I just take a cold shower, but I don't wipe myself off," said Tammie, "I just let the little drops stay there."

Bobby said, "Sometimes I take a real hot bath. The water's so hot that I've got to slip in real slow."

Then Bobby got up and demonstrated how he slipped into his real hot bath.

The conversation moved on to movies and television programs. They both seemed to love movies and television programs.

They talked for 2 or 3 hours, nonstop.

Then Bobby got up. "Well," he said, "I've got to go."

"Oh, please don't go, Bobby," said Tammie.

"No, I've got to go."

Valerie was due home from work.

53

On Thursday night Bobby phoned again. “Hey, man, what are you doing?”

“Not much.”

“Mind if I come down and have a few beers?”

“I’d rather not have any visitors tonight.”

“Oh, come on, man, I’ll just stay for a few beers… .”

“No, I’d rather not.”

“WELL, FUCK YOU THEN!” he screamed.

I hung up and went into the other room.

“Who was that?” Tammie asked.

“Just somebody who wanted to come by.”

“That was Bobby, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“You treat him mean. He gets lonely when his wife is at work. What the hell’s the matter with you?”

Tammie jumped up and ran into the bedroom and started dialing. I had just bought her a fifth of champagne. She hadn’t opened it. I took it and hid it in the broom closet.

“Bobby,” she said over the phone, “this is Tammie. Did you just phone? Where’s your wife? Listen, I’ll be right down.”

She hung up and came out of the bedroom. “Where’s the champagne?”

“Fuck off,” I said, “you’re not taking it down there and drinking it with him.”

“I want that champagne. Where is it?”

“Let him furnish his own.”

Tammie picked up a pack of cigarettes from the coffee table and ran out the door.

I got out the champagne, uncorked it and poured myself a glass. I was no longer writing love poems. In fact, I wasn’t writing at all. I didn’t feel like writing.

The champagne went down easy. I drank glass after glass.

Then I took my shoes off and walked down to Bobby's place. I looked through the blinds. They were sitting very close together on the couch, talking.

I walked back. I finished the last of the champagne and started in on the beer.

The phone rang. It was Bobby. "Look," he said, "Why don't you come down and have a beer with Tammie and me?"

I hung up.

I drank some more beer and smoked a couple of cheap cigars. I got drunker and drunker. I walked down to Bobby's apartment. I knocked. He opened the door.

Tammie was down at the end of the couch snorting coke, using a McDonald's spoon. Bobby put a beer in my hand.

"The trouble," he told me, "is that you're insecure, you lack confidence in yourself."

I sucked at the beer.

"That's right, Bobby's right," said Tammy.

"Something hurts inside of me."

"You're just insecure," said Bobby, "it's quite simple."

I had two phone numbers for Joanna Dover. I tried the one in Galveston. She answered. "It's me, Henry." "You sound drunk." "I am. I want to come see you." "When?" "Tomorrow." "All right."

"Will you meet me at the airport?" "Sure, baby." "I'll get a flight and call you back."

I got flight 707, leaving L. A. International the next day at 12:15 pm. I relayed the information to Joanna Dover. She said she'd be there.

The phone rang. It was Lydia.

"I thought I'd tell you," she said, "that I sold the house. I'm moving to Phoenix. I'll be gone in the morning."

"All right, Lydia. Good luck."

"I had a miscarriage. I almost died, it was awful. I lost so much blood. I didn't want to bother you about it."

"Are you all right now?"

"I'm all right. I just want to get out of this town, I'm sick of this town."

We said goodbye.

I opened another beer. The front door opened and Tammie walked in. She walked in wild circles, looking at me.

"Did Valerie get home?" I asked. "Did you cure Bobby's loneliness?"

Tammie just kept circling around. She looked very good in her long gown, whether she had been fucked or not.

"Get out of here," I said.

She made one more circle, ran out the door and up to her place.

I couldn't sleep. Luckily, I had some more beer. I kept drinking beer and finished the last bottle about 4:30 am. I sat and waited until 6 am, then went out and got some more.

Time went slowly. I walked around. I didn't feel good but I started singing songs. I sang songs and walked around—from bathroom to bedroom to the front room to the kitchen and back, singing songs.

I looked at the clock. 11:15 am. The airport was an hour away. I was dressed. I had on shoes but no stockings. All I took was a pair of reading glasses which I stuffed into my shirt pocket. I ran out the door without baggage.

The Volks was in front. I got in. The sunlight was very bright. I put my head down on the steering wheel a moment. I heard a voice from the court, "Where the hell does he think he's going like that?"

I started the car, turned the radio on and drove off. I had trouble steering. My car kept pulling across the double yellow line and into the oncoming traffic. They honked and I pulled back.

I got to the airport. I had 15 minutes left. I had run red lights, stop signs, had exceeded the speed limit, grossly, all the way. I had 14 minutes. The parking lot was full. I couldn't find a space. Then I saw a place in front of an elevator, just large enough for a Volks. A sign read, NO PARKING. I parked. As I locked the car my reading glasses fell out of my pocket and broke on the pavement.

I ran down the stairway and across the street to the airline reservations desk. It was hot. The sweat rolled off me. “Reservation for Henry Chinaski. …” The clerk wrote out the ticket and I paid cash. “By the way,” said the clerk, “I’ve read your books.”

I ran up to security. The buzzer went off. Too much change, 7 keys and my pocketknife. I put them on the plate and walked through again.

Five minutes. Gate 42.

Everyone had boarded. I walked on. Three minutes. I found my seat, strapped in. The flight captain was talking over the intercom.

We taxied down the runway, we were in the air. We swung out over the ocean and made the big turn.

54

I was the last one off the plane and there was Joanna Dover.

"My god!" she laughed. "You look awful!"

"Joanna, let's have a Bloody Mary while we wait for my baggage. Oh hell, I don't have any baggage. But let's have a Bloody Mary anyhow."

We walked into the bar and sat down.

"You'll never make Paris this way."

"I'm not crazy about the French. Born in Germany, you know."

"I hope you'll like my place. It's simple. Two floors and plenty of space."

"As long as we're in the same bed."

"I've got paints."

"Paints?"

"I mean, you can paint if you want."

"Shit, but thanks, anyhow. Did I interrupt anything?"

"No. There was a garage mechanic. But he petered out. He couldn't stand the pace."

"Be kind to me, Joanna, sucking and fucking aren't everything."

"That's why I got the paints. For when you're resting."

"You are a lot of woman, even forgetting the 6 feet."

"Christ, don't I know it."

I liked her place. There were screens on every window and door. The windows swung open, large windows. There were no rugs on the floors, two bathrooms, old furniture, and lots of tables everywhere, large and small. It was simple and convenient.

"Take a shower," said Joanna.

I laughed. "These are all the clothes I have, what I'm wearing."

"We'll get you some more tomorrow. After you have your shower we'll go out and get a nice seafood meal. I know a good place."

“They serve drinks?”

“You asshole.”

I didn’t take a shower. I took a bath.

We drove quite a distance. I had never realized that Galveston was an island.

“The dope runners are hijacking the shrimp boats these days. They kill everybody on board and then run the stuffin. That’s one reason the price of shrimp is going up—it’s become a hazardous occupation. How’s your occupation going?”

“I haven’t been writing. I think it’s over for me.”

“How long has it been?”

“Six or seven days.”

“This is the place. …”

Joanna pulled into a parking lot. She drove very fast, but she didn’t drive fast as if she meant to break the law. She drove fast as if it were her given right. There was a difference and I appreciated it.

We got a table away from the crowd. It was cool and quiet and dark in there. I liked it. I went for the lobster. Joanna went for something strange. She ordered it in French. She was sophisticated, traveled. In a sense, as much as I disliked it, education helped when you were looking at a menu or for a job, especially when you were looking at a menu. I always felt inferior to waiters. I had arrived too late and with too little. The waiters all read Truman Capote. I read the race results.

The dinner was good and out on the gulf were the shrimp boats, the patrol boats and the pirates. The lobster tasted good in my mouth, and I drank him down with fine wine. Good fellow. I always liked you in your pink-red shell, dangerous and slow.

Back at Joanna Dover’s place we had a delicious bottle of red wine. We sat in the dark watching the few cars pass in the street below. We were quiet. Then Joanna spoke.

“Hank?”

“Yes?”

“Was it some woman who drove you here?”

"Yes."

"Is it over with her?"

"I'd like to think so. But if I said 'no' …"

"Then you don't know?"

"Not really."

"Does anybody ever know?"

"I don't think so." "That's what makes it all stink so." "It does stink." "Let's fuck." "I've drunk too much." "Let's go to bed." "I want to drink some more." "You won't be able to …"

"I know. I hope you'll let me stay four or five days." "It will depend on your performance," she said. "That's fair enough."

By the time we finished the wine I could barely make it to bed. I was asleep by the time Joanna came out of the bathroom… .

55

Upon awakening I got up and used Joanna's toothbrush, drank a couple of glasses of water, washed my hands and face and got back into bed. Joanna turned around and my mouth found hers. My cock began to rise. I put her hand on my cock. I grabbed her hair, pulling her head back, kissing her, savagely. I played with her cunt. I teased her clit for a long time. She was very wet. I mounted and buried it. I held it in. I could feel her responding. I was able to work a long time. Finally I was unable to hold back any longer. I was wet with sweat and my heart beat so loudly that I could hear it.

"I'm not in very good shape," I told her.

"I liked it. Let's have a joint."

She produced a joint, already rolled. We passed it back and forth. "Joanna," I told her, "I'm still sleepy. I could use another hour."

"Sure. As soon as we finish this joint."

We finished the joint and stretched out in bed again. I slept.

56

That evening after dinner Joanna produced some mescaline.

"You ever tried this stuff?"

"No."

"Want to try some?"

"All right."

Joanna had some paints and brushes and paper spread on the table. Then I remembered she was an art collector. And that she had bought some of my paintings. We had been drinking Heine-kens most of the evening, but were still sober.

"This is very powerful stuff."

"What does it do?"

"It gives you a strange kind of high. You might get sick. When you vomit you get higher but I prefer not to vomit so we take a little baking soda along with it. I guess the main thing about mescaline is that it makes you feel terror."

"I've felt that without any help at all."

I began painting. Joanna turned the stereo on. It was very strange music, but I liked it. I looked around and Joanna was gone. I didn't care. I painted a man who had just committed suicide, he had hung himself from the rafters with a rope. I used many yellows, the dead man was so bright and pretty. Then something said, "Hank …"

It was right behind me. I leaped out of my chair, "JESUS CHRIST! OH, JESUS SHIT CHRIST!"

Tiny icy bubbles ran from my wrists to my shoulders and down my back. I shivered and trembled. I looked around. Joanna was standing there.

"Never do that to me again," I told her. "Never sneak up on me like that or I'll kill you!"

"Hank, I just went to get some cigarettes."

"Look at this painting."

"Oh, it's great," she said, "I really love it!"

"It's the mescaline, I guess."

"Yes, it is."

"All right, give me a smoke, lady."

Joanna laughed and lit us up two.

I began painting again. This time I really did it: A huge, green wolf fucking a redhead, her red hair flowing back while the green wolf slammed it to her through lifted legs. She was helpless and submissive. The wolf sawed away and overhead the night burned, it was outdoors, and long-armed stars and the moon watched them. It was hot, hot, and full of color.

"Hank …"

I leaped up. And turned. It was Joanna behind me. I got her by the throat. "I told you, goddamn you, not to sneak up …"

57

I stayed five days and nights. Then I couldn't get it up any more. Joanna drove me to the airport. She had bought me a new piece of luggage and some new clothing. I hated that Dallas-Fort Worth airport. It was the most inhuman airport in the U.S. Joanna waved me off and I was in the air… .

The trip to Los Angeles was without incident. I disembarked, wondering about the Volks. I took the elevator up in the parking area and didn't see it. I figured it must have been towed away. Then I walked around to the other side—and there it was. All I had was a parking ticket.

I drove home. The apartment looked the way it always had—bottles and trash everywhere. I'd have to clean it up a bit. If anybody saw it that way they'd have me committed.

There was a knock. I opened the door. It was Tammie. "Hi!" she said.

"Hello."

"You must have been in an awful hurry when you left. All the doors were unlocked. The back door was wide open. Listen, promise you won't tell if I tell you something?"

"All right."

"Arlene went in and used your phone, long distance."

"All right."

"I tried to stop her but I couldn't. She was on pills."

"All right."

"Where've you been?"

"Galveston."

"Why did you go flying off like that? You're crazy."

"I've got to leave again Saturday."

"Saturday? What's today?"

"Thursday."

"Where are you going?"

"New York City."

"Why?"

"A reading. They sent the tickets two weeks ago. And I get a percentage of the gate."

"Oh, take me with you! I'll leave Dancy with Mother. I want to go!"

"I can't afford to take you. It'll eat up my profits. I've had some heavy expenses lately."

"I'll be good! I'll be so good! I'll never leave your side! I really missed you."

"I can't do it, Tammie."

She went to the refrigerator and got a beer. "You just don't give a fuck. All those love poems, you didn't mean it."

"I meant it when I wrote them."

The phone rang. It was my editor. "Where've you been?"

"Galveston. Research."

"I hear you're reading in New York City this Saturday."

"Yes, Tammie wants to go, my girl."

"Are you taking her?"

"No, I can't afford it."

"How much is it?"

"$316 round trip."

"Do you really want to take her?"

"Yes, I think so."

"All right, go ahead. I'll mail you a check."

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes."

"I don't know what to say. …"

"Forget it. Just remember Dylan Thomas."

"They won't kill me."

We said goodbye. Tammie was sucking on her beer.

"All right," I told her, "you've got two or three days to pack."

"You mean, I'm going?"

"Yes, my editor is paying your way."

Tammie leaped up and grabbed me. She kissed me, grabbed my balls, pulled at my cock. "You're the sweetest old fuck!"

New York City. Outside of Dallas, Houston, Charleston, and Atlanta, it was the worst place I had ever been. Tammie pushed up against me and my cock rose. Joanna Dover hadn't gotten it all… .

58

We had a 3:30 pm flight out of Los Angeles that Saturday. At 2 pm I went up and knocked on Tammie's door. She wasn't there. I want back to my place and sat down. The phone rang. It was Tammie. "Look," I said, "we have to think about leaving. I have people meeting me at Kennedy airport. Where are you?"

"I'm $6 short on a prescription. I'm getting some Quaaludes."

"Where are you?"

"I'm just below Santa Monica Boulevard and Western, about a block. It's an Owl drugstore. You can't miss it."

I hung up, got into the Volks and drove over. I parked a block below Santa Monica and Western, got out and looked around. There was no pharmacy.

I got back in the Volks and drove along looking for her red Camaro. Then I saw it, five blocks further down. I parked and walked in. Tammie was sitting in a chair. Dancy ran up and made a face at me.

"We can't take the kid."

"I know. We'll drop her off over at my mother's."

"Your mother's? That's 3 miles the other way."

"It's on the way to the airport."

"No, it's in the other direction."

"Do you have the 6 bucks?"

I gave Tammie the six.

"I'll see you back at your place. You packed?"

"Yes, I'm ready."

I drove back and waited. Then I heard them.

"Mommy!" Dancy said, "I want a Ding-Dong!"

They went up the stairs. I waited for them to come down. They didn't come down. I went up. Tammie was packed, but she was down on her knees zipping and unzipping her baggage.

"Look," I said, "I'll carry your other stuff down to the car."

She had two large paper shopping bags, stuffed, and three dresses on hangers. All this besides her luggage.

I took the shopping bags and the dresses down to the Volks. When I came back she was still zipping and unzipping her luggage.

"Tammie, let's go."

"Wait a minute."

She knelt there running the zipper back and forth, up and down. She didn't look into the baggage. She just ran the zipper up and down.

"Mommy," said Dancy, "I want a Ding-Dong."

"Come on, Tammie, let's go."

"Oh, all right."

I picked up the zipper bag and they followed me out.

I followed her battered red Camaro to her mother's place. We went in. Tammie stood at her mother's dresser and started pulling drawers out, in and out. Each time she pulled a drawer out she reached in and mixed everything up. Then she'd slam the drawer and go to the next. Same thing.

"Tammie, the plane is ready to take off."

"Oh no, we've got plenty of time. I hate hanging around airports."

"What are you going to do about Dancy?"

"I'm going to leave her here until Mother gets home from work."

Dancy let out a wail. Finally she knew, and she wailed, and the tears ran, and then she stopped, balled her fists and screamed, "I WANT A DING-DONG!"

"Listen, Tammie, I'll be waiting in the car."

I went out and waited. I waited five minutes then went back in. Tammie was still sliding the drawers in and out.

"Please, Tammie, let's leave!"

"All right."

She turned to Dancy. "Look, you stay here until Grandma gets home. Keep the door locked and don't Jet anybody in but Grandma!"

Dancy wailed again. Then she screamed, "I HATE YOU!"

Tammie followed me and we got into the Volks. I started the engine. She opened the door and was gone. "I HAVE TO GET SOMETHING OUT OF MY CAR!"

Tammie ran over to the Camaro. "Oh shit, I locked it and I don't have the key for the door! Do you have a coat hanger?"

"No," I screamed, "I don't have a coat hanger!"

"Be right back!"

Tammie ran back to her mother's apartment. I heard the door open. Dancy wailed and shouted. Then I heard the door slam and Tammie returned with a coat hanger. She went to the Camaro and jimmied the door.

I walked over to her car. Tammie had climbed into the back seat and was going through that incredible mess—clothing, paper bags, paper cups, newspapers, beer bottles, empty cartons—piled in there. Then she found it: her camera, the Polaroid I had given her for her birthday.

As I drove along, racing the Volks like I was out to win the 500, Tammie leaned over.

"You really love me, don't you?"

"Yes."

"When we get to New York I'm going to fuck you like you've never been fucked before!"

"You mean it?"

"Yes."

She grabbed my cock and leaned against me.

My first and only redhead. I was lucky… .

59

We ran up the long ramp. I was carrying her dresses and the shopping bags.

At the escalator Tammie saw the flight insurance machine.

"Please," I said, "we only have five minutes until take-off."

"I want Dancy to have the money."

"All right."

"Do you have two quarters?"

I gave her two quarters. She inserted them and a card jumped out of the machine.

"You got a pen?"

Tammie filled out the card and then there was an envelope. She put the card in the envelope. Then she tried to insert it in the slot in the machine.

"This thing won't go in!"

"We're going to miss the plane."

She kept trying to jam the envelope in the slot. She couldn't get it in.

She stood there and kept jamming the envelope at the slot. Now the envelope was completely bent in half and all the edges were bent.

"I'm going mad," I told her. "I can't stand it."

She jammed a few more times. It wouldn't go. She looked at me. "O.K., let's go."

We went up the escalator with her dresses and shopping bags.

We found the boarding gate. We got two seats near the back. We strapped in. "You see," she said, "I told you we had plenty of time."

I looked at my watch. The plane started to roll… .

60

We were in the air twenty minutes when she took a mirror out of her purse and began to make up her face, mostly the eyes. She worked at her eyes with a small brush, concentrating on the eyelashes. While she was doing this she opened her eyes very wide and she held her mouth open. I watched her and began to get a hard-on.

Her mouth was so very full and round and open and she kept working on her eyelashes. I ordered two drinks.

Tammie stopped to drink, then she continued.

A young fellow in the seat to the right of us began playing with himself. Tammie kept looking at her face in the mirror, holding her mouth open. It looked like she could really suck with that mouth.

She continued for an hour. Then she put the mirror and the brush away, leaned against me and went to sleep.

There was a woman in the seat to our left. She was in her mid-forties. Tammie was sleeping next to me.

The woman looked at me.

"How old is she?" she asked me.

It was suddenly very quiet on that jet. Everyone nearby was listening.

"23."

"She looks 17."

"She's 23."

"She spends two hours making up her face and then goes to sleep."

"It was about an hour."

"Are you going to New York?" the lady asked me.

"Yes."

"Is she your daughter?"

"No, I'm not her father or her grandfather. I'm not related to her in any way. She's my girlfriend and we're going to New

York." I could see the headline in her eyes: MONSTER FROM EAST HOLLYWOOD DRUGS 17 YEAR OLD GIRL, TAKES HER TO NEW YORK CITY WHERE HE SEXUALLY ABUSES HER, THEN SELLS HER BODY TO NUMEROUS BUMS

The lady questioner gave up. She stretched back in her seat and closed her eyes. Her head slipped down toward me. It was almost in my lap, it seemed. Holding Tammie, I watched that head. I wondered if she would mind if I crushed her lips with a crazy kiss. I got another hard-on.

We were ready to land. Tammie seemed very limp. It worried me. I strapped her in.

"Tammie, it's New York City! We're getting ready to land!

Tammie, wake up!"

No response.

An o.d.?

I felt her pulse. I couldn't feel anything.

I looked at her enormous breasts. I watched for some sign of breathing. They didn't move. I got up and found a stewardess.

"Please take your seat, sir. We are preparing to land."

"Look, I'm worried. My girlfriend won't wake up."

"Do you think she's dead?" she whispered.

"I don't know," I whispered back.

"All right, sir. As soon as we land I'll come back there."

The plane was starting to drop. I went into the crapper and wet some paper towels. I came back, sat next to Tammie and rubbed them over her face. All that makeup, wasted. Tammie didn't respond.

"You whore, wake up!"

I ran the towels down between her breasts. Nothing. No movement. I gave up.

I'd have to ship her body back somehow. I'd have to explain to her mother. Her mother would hate me.

We landed. The people got up and stood in line, waiting to get out. I sat there. I shook Tammie and pinched her. "It's New York City, Red. The rotten apple. Come around. Cut out the shit."

The stewardess came back and shook Tammie.

“Honey, what’s the matter?”

Tammie started responding. She moved. Then her eyes opened. It was only the matter of a new voice. Nobody listened to an old voice anymore. Old voices became a part of one’s self, like a fingernail.

Tammie got out her mirror and started combing her hair. The stewardess was patting her shoulder. I got up and got the dresses out of the overhead compartment. The shopping bags were up there too. Tammie continued to look into the mirror and comb her hair.

“Tammie, we’re in New York. Let’s get off.”

She moved quickly. I had the two shopping bags and the dresses. She went through the exit wiggling the cheeks of her ass. I followed her.

61

Our man was there to meet us, Gary Benson. He also wrote poetry and drove a cab. He was very fat but at least he didn’t look like a poet, he didn’t look North Beach or East Village or like an English teacher, and that helped because it was very hot in New York that day, nearly 110 degrees. We got the baggage and got into his car, not his cab, and he explained to us why it was almost useless to own a car in New York City. That’s why there were so many cabs. He got us out of the airport and he started driving and talking, and the drivers of New York City were just like New York City—nobody gave an inch or a damn. There was no compassion or courtesy: fender jammed against fender, they drove on. I understood it: anybody who gave an inch would cause a traffic jam, a disturbance, a murder. Traffic flowed endlessly like turds in a sewer. It was marvelous to see, and none of the drivers were angry, they were simply resigned to the facts.

But Gary did like to talk shop. “If it’s O.K. with you I’d like to tape you for a radio show, I’d like to do an interview.”

“All right, Gary, let’s say tomorrow after the reading.”

“I’m going to take you to see the poetry coordinator now. He has everything organized. He’ll show you where you’re staying and so forth. His name is Marshall Benchly and don’t tell him I told you but I hate his guts.”

We drove along and then we saw Marshall Benchly standing in front of a brownstone. There was no parking. He leaped in the car and Gary drove off. Benchly looked like a poet, a private-income poet who had never worked for a living; it showed. He was affected and bland, a pebble.

“We’ll take you to your place,” he said.

He proudly recited a long list of people who had stayed at my hotel. Some of the names I recognized, others I didn’t.

Gary drove into the unloading zone in front of the Chelsea Hotel. We got out. Gary said, “See you at the reading. And see you tomorrow.”

Marshall took us inside and we went up to the desk clerk. The Chelsea certainly wasn’t much, maybe that’s where it got its charm.

Marshall turned and handed me the key. “It’s Room 1010, Janis Joplin’s old room.”

“Thanks.”

“Many great artists have stayed in 1010.”

He walked us over to the tiny elevator.

“The reading’s at 8. I’ll pick you up at 7:30. We’ve been sold out for two weeks. We’re selling some standing-room tickets but we’ve got to be careful because of the fire department.”

“Marshall, where’s the nearest liquor store?”

“Downstairs and take a right.”

We said goodbye to Marshall and took the elevator up.

62

It was hot that night at the reading, which was to be held at St. Mark's Church. Tammie and I sat in what was used as the dressing room. Tammie found a full-length mirror leaning against the wall and began combing her hair. Marshall took me out in back of the church. They had a burial ground back there. Little cement tombstones sat on the earth and carved on the tombstones were inscriptions. Marshall walked me around and showed me the inscriptions. I always got nervous before a reading, very tense and unhappy. I almost always vomited. Then I did. I vomited on one of the graves.

"You just vomited on Peter Stuyvesant," Marshall said.

I walked back into the dressing room. Tammie was still looking at herself in the mirror. She looked at her face and her body, but mostly she was worried about her hair. She piled it on top of her head, looked at it that way and then let it fall back down.

Marshall put his head into the room. "Come on, they're waiting!"

"Tammie's not ready," I told him.

Then she piled her hair up on top of her head again and looked at herself. Then she let it fall. Then she stood close to the mirror and looked at her eyes.

Marshall knocked, then came in. "Come on, Chinaski!"

"Come on, Tammie, let's go."

"All right."

I walked out with Tammie at my elbow. They started applauding. The old Chinaski bullshit was working. Tammie went down into the crowd and I started to read. I had many beers in an ice bucket. I had old poems and new poems. I couldn't miss. I had St. Mark's by the cross.

63

We got back to 1010. I had my check. I'd left word that we didn't want to be disturbed. Tammie and I sat drinking. I'd read 5 or 6 love poems about her.

"They knew who I was," she said. "Sometimes I giggled. It was embarassing."

They had known who she was all right. She glistened with sex. Even the roaches and the ants and the flies wanted to fuck her.

There was a knock on the door. Two people had slipped through, a poet and his woman. The poet was Morse Jenkins from Vermont. His woman was Sadie Everet. He had four bottles of beer.

He wore sandals and old torn bluejeans; turquoise bracelets; a chain around his throat; he had a beard, long hair; orange blouse. He talked, and he talked. And walked around the room.

There is a problem with writers. If what a writer wrote was published and sold many, many copies, the writer thought he was great. If what a writer wrote was published and sold a medium number of copies, the writer thought he was great. If what a writer wrote was published and sold very few copies, the writer thought he was great. If what the writer wrote never was published and he didn't have the money to publish it himself, then he thought he was truly great. The truth, howevet, was that there was very little greatness. It was almost nonexistent, invisible. But you could be sure that the worst writers had the most confidence, the least self-doubt. Anyway, writers were to be avoided, and I tried to avoid them, but it was almost impossible. They hoped for some sort of brotherhood, some kind of togetherness. None of it had anything to do with writing, none of it helped at the typewriter.

"I sparred with Clay before he became Ali," said Morse. Morse jabbed and shuffled, danced. "He was pretty good, but I gave him a workout.”

Morse shadow-boxed about the room.

“Look at my legs!” he said. “I’ve got great legs!”

“Hank’s got better legs than you have,” said Tammie.

Being a leg-man, I nodded.

Morse sat down. He pointed a beer bottle at Sadie. “She works as a nurse. She supports me. But I’m going to make it someday. They’ll hear from me!”

Morse would never need a mike at his readings.

He looked at me. “Chinaski, you’re one of the two or three best living poets. You’re really making it. You write a tough line. But I’m coming on too! Let me read you my shit. Sadie, hand me my poems.”

“No,” I said, “wait! I don’t want to hear them.”

“Why not, man? Why not?”

“There’s been too much poetry tonight, Morse. I just want to lay back and forget it.”

“Well, all right… . Listen, you never answer my letters.”

“I’m not a snob, Morse. But I get 75 letters a month. If I answered them that’s all I would ever do.”

“I’ll bet you answer the women!”

“That depends. …”

“All right, man, I’m not bitter. I still like your stuff. Maybe I’ll never be famous but I think I will and I think you’ll be glad you met me. Come on, Sadie, let’s go… .”

I walked them to the door. Morse grabbed my hand. He didn’t pump it, and neither of us quite looked at the other. “You’re a good old guy,” he said.

“Thanks, Morse. …”

And then they were gone.

64

The next morning Tammie found a prescription in her purse. “I’ve got to get this filled,” she said. “Look at it.” It was wrinkled and the ink had run.

“What happened here?”

“Well, you know my brother, he’s a pill head.”

“I know your brother. He owes me twenty bucks.”

“Well, he tried to get this prescription away from me. He tried to strangle me. I put the prescription in my mouth and swallowed it. Or I pretended to swallow it. He wasn’t sure. That was the time I phoned you and asked you to come over and kick the shit out of him. He split. But I still had the prescription in my mouth. I haven’t used it yet. But I can get it filled here. It’s worth a try.”

“All right.”

We took the elevator down to the street. It was over ioo degrees. I could hardly move. Tammie started walking and I followed along behind her as she weaved from one edge of the sidewalk to the other.

“Come on!” she said. “Keep up!”

She was on something, it appeared to be downers. She was woozy. Tammie walked up to a newsstand and began staring at a periodical. I think it was Variety. She stood there and stood there. I stood there near her. It was boring and senseless. She just stared at Variety.

“Listen, sister, either buy the damned thing or move on!” It was the man inside the newsstand.

Tammie moved on. “My god, New York is a horrible place! I just wanted to see if there was anything about the reading!”

Tammie moved along, wiggling it, wobbling from one side of the pavement to the other. In Hollywood cars would have pulled over to the curbing, blacks would have made overtures, she would have been approached, serenaded, applauded. New

York was different; it was jaded and weary and it disdained flesh.

We were into a black district. They watched us walking by: the redhead with the long hair, stoned, and the old guy with gray in his beard walking behind her, wearily. I glanced at them sitting on their stoops; they had good faces. I liked them. I liked them better than I liked her.

I followed Tammie down the street. Then there was a furniture store. There was a broken down desk chair out in front on the sidewalk. Tammie walked over to the old desk chair and stood staring at it. She seemed hypnotized. She kept staring at the desk chair. She touched it with her finger. Minutes went by. Then she sat down in it.

"Look," I told her, "I'm going back to the hotel. You do whatever you want to do."

Tammie didn't even look up. She slid her hands back and forth on the arm rests of the desk chair. She was in a world of her own. I turned and walked off, back to the Chelsea.

I got some beer and took the elevator up. I undressed, took a shower, propped a couple of pillows against the headboard of the bed and sucked at the beer. Readings diminished me. They were soul-sucks. I finished one beer and opened another. Readings got you a piece of ass sometimes. Rock stars got ass; boxers on the way up got ass; great bullfighters got virgins. Somehow, only the bullfighters deserved any of it.

There was a knock on the door. I got up and opened it a crack. It was Tammie. She pushed in.

"I found this dirty Jew son-of-a-bitch. He wanted $12 to fill the prescription! It's 6 bucks on the coast. I told him I only had $6. He didn't care. A dirty Jew living in Harlem! Can I have a beer?"

Tammie took the beer and sat in the window, one leg out, one arm out, one leg in, one holding on to the raised window.

"I want to see the Statue of Liberty. I want to see Coney Island," she said.

I got myself a new beer.

"Oh, it's nice out here! It's nice and cool."

Tammie leaned out the window, looking.

Then she screamed.

The hand that had been holding on to the window slipped. I saw most of her body go out the window. Then it came back. Somehow she had pulled herself back inside. She sat there, stunned.

"That was close," I told her. "It would have made a good poem. I've lost a lot of women in a lot of ways, but that would have been a new way."

Tammie walked over to the bed. She stretched out face down. I realized she was still stoned. Then she rolled off the bed. She landed flat on her back. She didn't move. I walked over and picked her up and put her back on the bed. I grabbed her by the hair and kissed her viciously.

"Hey.... What're you doin'?"

I remembered she had promised me a piece of ass. I rolled her on her stomach, pulled her dress up, pulled her panties off. I climbed on top of her and rammed, trying to find her cunt. I poked and poked. It went in. It slid further and further in. I had her good. She made small sounds. Then the phone rang. I pulled out, got up and answered it. It was Gary Benson.

"I'm coming over with my tape recorder for that radio interview."

"When?"

"In about 45 minutes."

I hung up and went back to Tammie. I was still hard. I grabbed her hair, gave her another violent kiss. Her eyes were closed, her mouth was lifeless. I mounted her again. Outside they were sitting on their fire escapes. When the sun started to go down and some shade appeared they came out to cool off. The people of New York City sat out there and drank beer and soda and ice water. They endured and smoked cigarettes. Just being alive was a victory. They decorated their fire escapes with plants. They made do with what there was.

I went straight for Tammie's core. Dog fashion. Dogs knew best. I whammed away. It was good to be out of the post office. I rocked and socked her body. Despite the pills she was trying to speak. "Hank …" she said.

I came finally, then rested on her. We were both drenched with sweat. I rolled off, got up, undressed, and walked to the shower. Once again I had fucked this redhead 32 years younger than I was. It felt fine in the shower. I intended to live to be 80 so that I could then fuck an 18 year old girl. The air conditioner didn't work, but the shower did. It felt really good. I was ready for my radio interview.

65

Back in L.A., there was almost a week of peace. Then the phone rang. It was the owner of a Manhattan Beach nightclub, Marty Seavers. I had read there a couple of times before. The club was called Smack-Hi.

"Chinaski, I want you to read a week from Friday. You can pick up about $450."

"All right."

Rock groups played there. It was a different audience than at the colleges. They were as obnoxious as I was and we cursed one another between poems. I preferred it.

"Chinaski," Marty said, "you think you have trouble with women. Let me tell you. The one I've got now has a way with windows and screens. I'll be sleeping and she'll appear in the bedroom at 3 or 4 am. She'll shake me. It scares the shit out of me. She stands there and says, 'I just wanted to make sure you were sleeping alone!'"

"Death and transfiguration."

"The other night, I'm sitting and there's a knock on the door. I know it's her. I open the door and she isn't there. It's 11 pm and I'm in my shorts. I've been drinking and I'm worried. I run outside in my shorts. I had given her $400 worth of dresses for her birthday. I run outside and there are the dresses, on the roof of my new car, and they're on fire, they're burning! I run up to pull them off and she leaps out from behind a bush and starts screaming. The neighbors look out and there I am in my shorts, burning my hands, snatching the dresses off the roof."

"She sounds like one of mine," I said.

"O.K., so I figured we were through. I'm sitting here two nights later, I had to work the club that night, so I'm sitting here at 3 am drunk and in my shorts again. There's a knock on the door. It's her knock. I open it and she isn't there. I go out to my car and she has more dresses soaked in gasoline and burning. She had saved some. Only this time they are burning on the hood. She leaps out from somewhere and starts screaming. The neighbors look out. There I am again in my shorts trying to get these burning dresses off the hood."

"That's great, I wish it had happened to me."

"You should see my new car. It has paint blisters all over the hood and the roof."

"Where is she now?"

"We're back together. She's coming over in 30 minutes. Can I put you down for the reading?"

"Sure."

"You outdraw the rock groups. I never saw anything like it. I'd like to bring you in every Friday and Saturday night."

"It wouldn't work, Marty. You can play the same song over and over, but with poems they want something new."

Marty laughed and hung up.

66

I took Tammie. We got there a little early and went to a bar across the street. We got a table.

"Now don't drink too much, Hank. You know how you slur your words and miss your lines when you get too drunk."

"At last," I said, "you're talking sense."

"You're afraid of the audience, aren't you?"

"Yes, but it's not stagefright. It's that I'm there as the geek. They like to watch me eat my shit. But it pays the light bill and takes me to the racetrack. I don't have any excuses about why I do it."

"I'll have a Stinger," said Tammie.

I told the girl to bring us a Stinger and a Bud.

"I'll be all right tonight," she said, "don't worry about me."

Tammie drank the Stinger down.

"These Stingers don't seem to have much in them. I'll have another."

We had another Stinger and another Bud.

"Really," she said, "I don't think they're putting anything into these drinks. I better have another."

Tammie had five Stingers in 40 minutes.

We knocked on the back door of the Smack-Hi. One of Marty's big bodyguards let us in. He had these malfunctioning thyroid types working for him to keep law and order when the teenyboppers, the hairy freaks, the glue sniffers, the acid heads, the plain grass folk, the alcoholics—all the miserable, the damned, the bored and the pretenders—got out of hand.

I was getting ready to puke and I did. This time I found a trash can and let it go. The last time I had dumped it just outside Marty's office. He was pleased with the change.

67

Want something to drink?” Marty asked.

“I’ll have a beer,” I said.

“I’ll have a Stinger,” said Tammie.

“Get a seat for her, put her on the tab,” I told Marty.

“All right. We’ll set her up. We’re S.R.O. We’ve had to turn away 150 and it’s 30 minutes before you go on.”

“I want to introduce Chinaski to the audience,” said Tammie.

“O.K. with you?” asked Marty.

“O.K.”

They had a kid out there with a guitar, Dinky Summers, and the crowd was disemboweling him. Eight years ago Dinky had had a gold record, but nothing since.

Marty got on an intercom and dialed out. “Listen,” he asked, “is that guy as bad as he sounds?”

You could hear a woman’s voice over the phone. “He’s terrible.”

Marty hung up.

“We want Chinaski!” they yelled.

“All right,” we could hear Dinky, “Chinaski is next.”

He started singing again. They were drunk. They hooted and hissed. Dinky sang on. He finished his act and got offstage. One could never tell. Some days it was better to stay in bed with the covers pulled up.

There was a knock. It was Dinky in his red, white and blue tennis shoes, white t-shirt, cords and brown felt hat. The hat sat perched on a mass of blonde curls. The t-shirt said, “God is Love.”

Dinky looked at us. “Was I really that bad? I want to know. Was I really that bad?”

Nobody answered.

Dinky looked at me. “Hank, was I that bad?”

“The crowd is drunk. It’s carnival time.”

“I want to know if I was bad or not?”

“Have a drink.”

“I gotta go find my girl,” Dinky said. “She’s out there alone.”

“Look,” I said, “let’s get it over with.”

“Fine,” said Marty, “go get it on.”

“I’m introducing him,” said Tammie.

I walked out with her. As we approached the stage they saw us and began screaming, cursing. Bottles fell off tables. There was a fist fight. The boys at the post office would never believe this.

Tammie went out to the mike. “Ladies and gentlemen,” she said, “Henry Chinaski couldn’t make it tonight… .”

There was silence.

Then she said, “Ladies and gentlemen, Henry Chinaski!”

I walked on. They jeered. I hadn’t done anything yet. I took the mike. “Hello, this is Henry Chinaski… .”

The place trembled with sound. I didn’t need to do anything. They would do it all. But you had to be careful. Drunk as they were they could immediately detect any false gesture, any false word. You could never underestimate an audience. They had paid to get in; they had paid for drinks; they intended to get something and if you didn’t give it to them they’d run you right into the ocean.

There was a refrigerator on stage. I opened it. There must have been 40 bottles of beer in there. I reached in and got one, twisted the cap off, took a hit. I needed that drink.

Then a man down front hollered, “Hey, Chinaski, we:’repaying for drinks!”

It was a fat guy in the front row in a mailman’s outfit.

I went into the refrigerator and took out a beer. I walked over and handed him the beer. Then I walked back, reached in, and got some more beers. I handed them to the people in the first row.

“Hey, how about us?” A voice from near the back.

I took a bottle and looped it through the air. I threw a few more back there. They were good. They caught them all. Then one slipped out of my hand and went high into the air. I heard it smash. I decided to quit. I could see a lawsuit: skull fracture.

There were 20 bottles left.

“Now, the rest of these are mine!”

“You gonna read all night?”

“I’m gonna drink all night… .”

Applause, jeers, belches… .

“YOU FUCKING HUNK OF SHIT!” some guy screamed.

“Thank you, Aunt Tilly,” I answered.

I sat down, adjusted the mike, and started on the first poem. It became quiet. I was in the ring alone with the bull now. I felt some terror. But I had written the poems. I read them out. It was best to open up light, a poem of mockery. I finished it and the walls rocked. Four or five people were fighting during the applause. I was going to luck out. All I had to do was hang in there.

You couldn’t underestimate them and you couldn’t kiss their ass. There was a certain middle ground to be achieved.

I read more poems, drank the beer. I got drunker. The words were harder to read. I missed lines, dropped poems on the floor. Then I stopped and just sat there drinking.

“This is good,” I told them, “you pay to watch me drink.”

I made an effort and read them some more poems. Finally I read them a few dirty ones and wound it up.

“That’s it,” I said.

They yelled for more.

The boys at the slaughterhouse, the boys at Sears Roebuck, all the boys at all the warehouses where I worked as a kid and as a man never would have believed it.

In the office there were more drinks and several fat joints, bombers. Marty got on the intercom to find out about the gate.

Tammie stared at Marty. “I don’t like you,” she said. “I don’t like your eyes at all.”

“Don’t worry about his eyes,” I told her. “Let’s just get the money and go.”

Marty made the check out and handed it to me. “Here it is,” he said, “$200… .”

“$200!” Tammie screamed at him. “You rotten son-of-a-bitch!”

I read the check. “He’s kidding,” I told her, “calm down.”

She ignored me. “$200,” she said to Marty, “you rotten ...”

“Tammie,” I said, “it’s $400... .”

“Sign the check,” said Marty, “and I’ll give you cash.”

“I got pretty drunk out there,” Tammie told me. “I asked this guy, ‘Can I lean my body against your body?’ He said, ‘O.K.’”

I signed and Marty gave me a stack of bills. I put them in my pocket.

“Look, Marty, I guess we better be leaving.”

“I hate your eyes,” Tammie said to Marty.

“Why don’t you stay and talk awhile?” Marty asked me.

“No, we’ve got to go.

Tammie stood up. “I have to go to the ladies’ restroom.”

She left.

Marty and I sat there. Ten minutes went by. Marty stood up and said, “Wait, I’ll be right back.”

I sat and waited, 5 minutes, 10 minutes. I walked out of the office and out the back door. I walked to the parking lot and sat in my Volks. Fifteen minutes went by, 20, 25.

I’ll give her 5 more minutes and then I’m leaving, I thought.

Just then Marty and Tammie walked out the back door and into the alley.

Marty pointed. “There he is.” Tammie walked over. Her clothes were all messed up and twisted. She climbed into the back seat and curled up.

I got lost 2 or 3 times on the freeway. Finally I pulled up in front of the court. I awakened Tammie. She got out, ran up the stairs to her place, and slammed the door.

68

It was a Wednesday night, 12:30 am and I was very sick. My stomach was raw, but I managed to hold down a few beers. Tammie was with me and she seemed sympathetic. Dancy was at her grandmother's.

Even though I was ill it seemed, finally, to be a good time—just two people being together.

There was a knock on the door. I opened it. It was Tammie's brother, Jay, with another young man, Filbert, a small Puerto Rican. They sat down and I gave each of them a beer.

"Let's go to a dirty movie," said Jay.

Filbert just sat there. He had a black carefully-trimmed mustache and his face had very little expression. He didn't give off any rays at all. I thought of terms like blank, wooden, dead, and so forth.

"Why don't you say something, Filbert?" Tammie asked.

He didn't speak.

I got up, went to the kitchen sink and vomited. I came back and sat down. I had a new beer. I hated it when the beer wouldn't stay down. I simply had been drunk too many days and nights in a row. I needed a rest. And I needed a drink. Just beer. You'd think I could hold down beer. I took a long pull.

The beer wouldn't stay down. I went to the bathroom. Tammie knocked, "Hank, are you all right?"

I washed out my mouth and opened the door. "I'm sick, that's all."

"Do you want me to get rid of them?"

"Sure."

She went back to them. "Look, fellows, why don't we go up to my place?"

I hadn't expected that.

Tammie had neglected to pay her electric bill, or she didn't want to, and they sat up there by candlelight. She had taken a fifth of mixed margarita cocktails I had purchased earlier in the day up there with her.

I sat and drank alone. The next beer stayed down.

I could hear them up there, talking.

Then Tammie's brother left. I watched him walk in the moonlight towards his car… .

Tammie and Filbert were up there alone together, by candlelight.

I sat with the lights out, drinking. An hour passed. I could see the wavering candlelight in the dark. I looked around. Tammie had left her shoes. I picked up her shoes and went up the stairway. Her door was open and I heard her talking to Filbert… . "So, anyway, what I meant was …"

She heard me walking up the stairs. "Henry, is that you?"

I threw Tammie's shoes the remainder of the way up the stairway. They landed outside her door.

"You forgot your shoes," I said.

"Oh, God bless you," she said.

About 10:30 the next morning Tammie knocked on the door. I opened it. "You rotten goddamned bitch." "Stop talking that way," she said. "Want a beer?"

"All right."

She sat down. "Well, we drank the bottle of margaritas. Then my brother left. Filbert was very nice. He just sat and didn't talk much. 'How are you going to get home?' I asked him. 'Do you have a car?' And he said he didn't. He just sat there looking at me and I said, 'Well, I have a car, I'll drive you home.' So I drove him home. Anyhow, since I was there I went to bed with him. I was pretty drunk, but he didn't touch me. He said he had to go to work in the morning." Tammie laughed. "Sometime during the night he tried to approach me. I put the pillow over my head and just started giggling. I kept the pillow there and giggled. He gave up. After he left for work I drove over to my mother's and took Dancy to school. And now here I am… ."

The next day Tammie was on uppers. She kept running in and out of my place. Finally she told me, "I'll be back tonight. I'll see you tonight!"

"Forget tonight."

"What's wrong with you? Plenty of men would be happy to see me tonight."

Tammie slammed out of the door. There was a pregnant cat sleeping on my porch.

"Get the hell out of here, Red!"

I picked up the pregnant cat and threw it at her. I missed by a foot and the cat dropped into a nearby bush.

The following night Tammie was on speed. I was drunk. Tammie and Dancy screamed at me from the window above.

"Go eat jerk-off, ya jerk!"

"Yeah, go eat jerk-off, you jerk! HAHAHA!"

"Ah, balloons!" I answered, "your mother's big balloons!"

"Go eat rat droppings, ya jerk!"

"You jerk, you jerk, you jerk! HAHAHA!"

"Fruit fly brains," I answered, "suck the cotton out of my navel!"

"You …" began Tammie.

Suddenly there were several pistol shots nearby, either in the street or in the back of the court or behind the apartment next door. Very near. It was a poor neighborhood with lots of prostitution and drugs and occasionally a murder.

Dancy started screaming out the window: "HANK! HANK! COME UP HERE, HANK! HANK, HANK, HANK! HURRY, HANK!"

I ran up. Tammie was stretched out on the bed, all that glorious red hair flared out on the pillow. She saw me.

"I've been shot," she said weakly. "I've been shot."

She pointed to a spot on her bluejeans. She was not joking anymore. She was terrified.

There was a red stain, but it was dry. Tammie liked to use my paints. I reached down and touched the dry stain. She was all right, except for the pills.

"Listen," I told her, "you're all right, don't worry. …"

As I walked out the door Bobby came pounding up the stairs. "Tammie, Tammie, what's wrong? Are you all right?"

Bobby evidently had had to get dressed, which explained the time lag.

As he bounced past me I told him quickly, “Jesus Christ, man, you’re always in my life.”

He ran into Tammie’s apartment followed by the guy next door, a used car salesman and a certified nut.

Tammie came down a few days later with an envelope.

“Hank, the manager just served me with an eviction notice.”

She showed it to me.

I read it carefully. “It looks like they mean it,” I said.

“I told her I’d pay the back rent but she said, ‘We want you out of here, Tammie!’”

“You can’t let the rent go too long.”

“Listen, I have the money. I just don’t like to pay.”

Tammie was completely contrary in her ways. Her car wasn’t registered, the license plate tabs had long ago expired, and she drove without a driver’s license. She left her car parked for days in yellow zones, red zones, white zones, reserved parking lots… . When the police stopped her drunk or high or without her i. d., she talked to them, and they always let her go. She tore up the parking tickets whenever she got them.

“I’ll get the owner’s phone number.” (We had an absentee landlord.) “They can’t kick my ass out of here. Do you have his phone number?”

“No.”

Just then Irv, who owned a whorehouse, and who also acted as bouncer at the local massage parlor walked by. Irv was 6 foot 3 and on ATD. He also had a better mind than the first 3,000 people you’d pass on the street.

Tammie ran out: “Irv! Irv!”

He stopped and turned. Tammie swung her breasts at him. “Irv, do you have the owner’s phone number?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Irv, I need the owner’s phone number. Give me his number and I’ll suck you off!”

“I don’t have the number.”

He walked up to his door and put his key into the lock.

"Come on, Irv, I'll suck you off if you tell me!"

"You really mean it?" he asked hesitating, looking at her.

Then he opened the door, walked in and closed it.

Tammie ran up to another door and beat on it. Richard opened the door cautiously, with the chain on it. He was bald, lived alone, was religious, about 45 and looked at television continually. He was as pink and clean as a woman. He complained continually about the noise from my place—he couldn't sleep, he said. The management told him to move. He hated me. Now there was one of my women at his door. He kept the chain on.

"What do you want?" he hissed.

"Look, baby, I want the owner's phone number… . You've lived here for years. I know you have his phone number. I need it."

"Go away," he said.

"Look, baby, I'll be nice to you. … A kiss, a nice big kiss for you!"

"Harlot!" he said "Strumpet!"

Richard slammed the door.

Tammie walked on in. "Hank?"

"Yes?"

"What's a strumpet? I know what a trumpet is, but what's a strumpet?"

"A strumpet, my dear, is a whore."

"Why that dirty son-of-a-bitch!"

Tammie walked outside and continued to beat on the doors of the other apartments. Either they were out or they didn't answer. She came back. "It's not fair! Why do they want me out of here? What have I done?"

"I don't know. Think back. Maybe there's something."

"I can't think of anything."

"Move in with me."

"You couldn't stand the kid."

"You're right."

The days passed. The owner remained invisible, he didn't like to deal with the tenants. The manager stood behind the eviction notice. Even Bobby became less visible, ate t.v. dinners, smoked his grass and listened to his stereo. "Hey, man," he told me, "I don't even like your old lady! She's busting up our friendship, man!"

"Right on, Bobby. …"

I drove to the market and got some empty cardboard cartons. Then Tammie's sister, Cathy, went crazy in Denver—after losing a lover—and Tammie had to go see her, with Dancy. I drove them down to the train depot. I put them on the train.

69

That evening the phone rang. It was Mercedes. I had met her after giving a poetry reading at Venice Beach. She was about 28, fair body, pretty good legs, a blonde about 5~feet-5, a blue-eyed blonde. Her hair was long and slightly wavy and she smoked continuously. Her conversation was dull, and her laugh was loud and false, most of the time.

I had gone to her place after the reading. She lived off the boardwalk in an apartment. I'd played the piano and she'd played the bongos. There was a jug of Red Mountain. There were joints. I got too drunk to leave. I had slept there that night and left in the morning.

"Look," said Mercedes, "I work right in your neighborhood now. I thought I might come by to see you."

"All right."

I hung up. The phone rang again. It was Tammie.

"Look, I've decided to move out. I'll be home in a couple of days. Just get my yellow dress out of the apartment, the one you like, and my green shoes. All the rest is crap. Leave it."

"O.K."

"Listen, I'm flat broke. We don't have any money for food."

"I'll wire you 40 bucks in the morning, Western Union."

"You're sweet. …"

I hung up. Fifteen minutes later Mercedes was there. She had on a very short skirt, was wearing sandals and a low-cut blouse. Also small blue earrings.

"You want some grass?" she asked.

"Sure."

She took the grass and the papers out of her purse and started rolling some joints. I broke out the beer and we sat on the couch and smoked and drank.

We didn't talk much. I played with her legs and we drank and smoked quite a long time.

Finally we undressed and went to bed, first Mercedes, then me. We began kissing and I rubbed her cunt. She grabbed my cock. I mounted. Mercedes guided it in. She had a good grip down there, very tight. I teased her a while, pulling it almost all the way out and moving the head back and forth. Then I slid it all the way in, slowly, in lazy fashion. Then suddenly I rammed her 4 or 5 times, and her head bounced on the pillow. "Arrrrggg… " she said. Then I eased up and stroked.

It was a very hot night and we both sweated. Mercedes was high on the beer and the joints. I decided to finish her off with a flourish. Show her a thing or two.

I pumped on and on. Five minutes. Ten minutes more. I couldn't come. I began to fail, I was getting soft.

Mercedes got worried. "Make it!" she demanded. "Oh, make it, baby!"

That didn't help at all. I rolled off.

It was an unbearably hot night. I took the sheet and wiped off the sweat. I could hear my heart pounding as I lay there. It sounded sad. I wondered what Mercedes was thinking.

I lay dying, my cock limp.

Mercedes turned her head toward me. I kissed her. Kissing is more intimate than fucking. That's why I never liked my girlfriends to go around kissing men. I'd rather they fucked them.

I kept kissing Mercedes and since I felt that way about kissing I hardened again. I climbed on top of her, kissing her as if it was my last hour on earth.

My cock slid in.

This time I knew I was going to make it. I could feel the miracle of it.

I was going to come in her cunt, the bitch. I was going to pour my juices into her and there was nothing she could do to stop me.

She was mine. I was a conquering army, I was a rapist, I was her master, I was death.

She was helpless. Her head rolled, she gripped me and gasped, as she made sounds… .

“Arrrgg, uuggg, oh oh … oooff … oooooh!”

My cock fed on it.

I made a strange sound, then I came.

In five minutes she was snoring. We both were snoring.

In the morning we showered and dressed. “I’ll take you to breakfast,” I said.

“All right,” Mercedes answered. “By the way, did we fuck last night?”

“My god! Don’t you remember? We must have fucked for 50 minutes!”

I couldn’t believe it. Mercedes looked unconvinced.

We went to a place around the corner. I ordered eggs over easy with bacon and coffee, wheat toast. Mercedes ordered hotcakes and ham, cofifee.

The waitress brought our orders. I took a bite of egg. Mercedes poured syrup over her hotcakes.

“You’re right,” she said, “you must have fucked me. I can feel the semen running down my leg.”

I decided not to see her again.

70

I went up to Tammie's place with my cardboard cartons. First I got the items she mentioned. Then I found other things—other dresses and blouses, shoes, an iron, a hair dryer, Dancy's clothing, dishes and flatware, a photo album. There was a heavy rattan chair which belonged to her. I took all the things down to my place. I had eight or ten cartons full of stuff. I stacked them against my front room wall.

The next day I drove down to the train station to pick Tammie and Dancy up.

"You're looking good," Tammie said.

"Thanks," I said.

"We're going to live at Mother's. You might as well drive us there. I can't fight that eviction. Besides, who wants to stay where they're not wanted?"

"Tammie, I moved most of your things. They're in cardboard cartons at my place."

"All right. Can I leave them there a while?"

"Sure."

Then Tammie's mother went to Denver, to see the sister, and the night she left I went to Tammie's to get drunk. Tammie was on pills. I didn't take any. When I got into the fourth 6-pack I said, "Tammie, I don't see what you see in Bobby. He's nothing."

She crossed her legs, and swung her foot back and forth.

"He thinks his small talk is charming," I said.

She kept swinging her foot.

"Movies, t.v., grass, comic books, dirty photos, that's his gas tank."

Tammie swung her foot harder.

"Do you really care for him?"

She kept swinging her foot.

"You fucking bitch!" I said.

I walked to the door, slammed it behind me, and got into the Volks. I raced through traffic, weaving in and out, destroying my clutch and gear shift.

I got back to my place and started loading the cartons of her stuff into my Volks. Also record albums, blankets, toys. The Volks, of course, didn't hold too much.

I speeded back to Tammie's. I pulled up and double-parked, put the red warning lights on. I pulled the boxes out of the car and stacked them on the porch. I covered them with blankets and toys, rang the bell and drove off.

When I came back with the second load the first load was gone. I made another stack, rang the bell and wheeled off like a missile.

When I came back with the third load the second was gone. I made a new stack and rang the bell. Then I was off again into the early morning.

When I got back to my place I had a vodka and water and looked at what was left. There was the heavy rattan chair and the stand-up hair dryer. I could only make one more run. It was either the chair or the dryer. The Volks couldn't consume both.

I decided on the rattan chair. It was 4 am. I was double-parked in front of my place with the warning lights on. I finished the vodka and water. I was getting drunker and weaker. I picked up the rattan, it was really heavy, and carried it down the walk to my car. I sat it down and opened the door opposite the driver's side. I jammed the rattan chair in. Then I tried to close the door. The chair was sticking out. I tried to pull the chair out of the car. It was stuck. I cursed, and pushed it further in. One leg of the rattan poked through the windshield and stuck out, pointing at the sky. The door still wouldn't close. It wasn't even close. I tried to push the leg of the chair further through the windshield so that I could close the door. It wouldn't budge. The chair was jammed in tight. I tried to pull it out. It wouldn't move. Desperately I pulled and pushed, pulled and pushed. If the police came, I was finished. After some time I wearied. I climbed in the driver's side. There were no parking spaces in the street. I drove the car down to the pizza parlor parking lot, the open door swinging back and forth. I left it there with the door open, the ceiling light on. (The ceiling light wouldn't shut off.) The windshield was smashed, the chair leg poking out into the moonlight. The whole scene was indecent, mad. It smacked of murder and assassination. My beautiful car.

I walked down the street and back to my place. I poured another vodka and water and phoned Tammie.

"Look, baby, I'm in a jam. I've got your chair stuck through my windshield and I can't get it out and I can't get it in and the door won't close. The windshield is smashed. What can I do? Help me, for Christ's sake!"

"You'll think of something, Hank."

She hung up.

I dialed again. "Baby… ."

She hung up. Then next the phone was off the hook: bzzzz, bzzzzzz, bzzzz… .

I stretched out on the bed. The phone rang.

"Tammie… ."

"Hank, this is Valerie. I just came home. I want to tell you that your car is parked in the pizza parlor with the door open."

"Thanks, Valerie, but I can't close the door. There is a rattan chair stuck through the windshield."

"Oh, I didn't notice that."

"I appreciate your phoning."

I fell asleep. It was one worried sleep. They were going to tow me away. I was going to get booked.

I awakened at 6:20 am, got dressed and walked to the pizza parlor. The car was still there. The sun was coming up.

I reached in and grabbed the rattan. It still wouldn't budge. I was furious, and began pulling and yanking, cursing. The more impossible it seemed, the madder I got. Suddenly there was a cracking of wood. I was inspired, energized. A piece of wood broke off in my hands. I looked at it, tossed it into the street, went back to my task. Something else broke off. The days in the factories, the days of unloading boxcars, the days of lifting cases of frozen fish, the days of carrying murdered cattle on my shoulders were paying off. I had always been strong but equally lazy. Now I was tearing that chair to pieces. Finally I ripped it out of the car. I attacked it in the parking lot. I smashed it to bits, I broke it in pieces. Then I picked up the pieces and stacked them neatly on somebody's front lawn.

I got in the Volks and found an empty parking space near my court. All I had to do now was find a junkyard on Santa Fe Avenue and buy myself a new windshield. That could wait. I went back in, drank two glasses of ice water and went to bed.

71

Four or five days passed. The phone rang. It was Tammie.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Listen, Hank. You know that little bridge you cross in your car when you drive to my mother's place?"

"Yes."

"Well, right by there they're having a yard sale. I went in and saw this typewriter. It's only 20 bucks and it's in good working order. Please get it for me, Hank."

"What do you want with a typewriter?"

"Well, I've never told you, but I've always wanted to be a writer."

"Tammie… ."

"Please, Hank, just this one last time. I'll be your friend for life."

"No."

"Hank… ."

"Oh, shit, well, all right."

"I'll meet you at the bridge in 15 minutes. I want to hurry before it's taken. I've found a new apartment and Filbert and my brother are helping me move… ."

Tammie wasn't at the bridge in 15. minutes or in 25 minutes. I got back in the Volks and drove over to Tammie's mother's apartment. Filbert was loading cartons into Tammie's car. He didn't see me. I parked a half a block away.

Tammie came out and saw my Volks. Filbert was getting into his car. He had a Volks, too, a yellow one. Tammie waved to him and said, "See you later!"

Then she walked down the street toward me. When she got near my car she stretched out in the center of the street and lay there. I waited. Then she got up, walked to my car, got in.

I pulled away. Filbert was sitting in his car. I waved to him as we drove my. He didn't wave back. His eyes were sad. It was just beginning for him.

"You know," Tammie said, "I'm with Filbert now."

I laughed. It welled out of me.

"We'd better hurry. The typer might be gone."

"Why don't you let Filbert buy the fucking thing?"

"Look, if you don't want to do it just stop the car and let me out!"

I stopped the car and opened the door.

"Listen, you son-of-a-bitch, you told me you'd buy that typer! If you don't, I'm going to start screaming and breaking your windows!"

"All right. The typer is yours."

We drove to the place. The typer was still there.

"This typewriter has spent its whole life up to now in an insane asylum," the lady told us.

"It's going to the right person," I replied.

I gave the lady a twenty and we drove back. Filbert was gone.

"Don't you want to come in for a while?" Tammie asked.

"No, I've got to go."

She was able to carry the typer in without help. It was a portable.

72

I drank for the next week. I drank night and day and wrote 25 or 30 mournful poems about lost love.

It was Friday night when the phone rang. It was Mercedes. "I got married," she said, "to Little Jack. You met him at the party that night you read in Venice. He's a nice guy and he's got money. We're moving to the Valley."

"All right, Mercedes, luck with it all."

"But I miss drinking and talking with you. Suppose I come over tonight?"

"All right."

She was there in 15 minutes, rolling joints and drinking my beer.

"Little Jack is a nice guy. We're happy together."

I sucked at my beer.

"I don't want to fuck," she said, "I'm tired of abortions, I'm really tired of abortions. …"

"We'll figure something out."

"I just want to smoke and talk and drink."

"That's not enough for me."

"All you guys want to do is fuck."

"I like it."

"Well, I can't fuck, I don't want to fuck."

"Relax."

We sat on the couch. We didn't kiss. Mercedes was not a good conversationalist. She wasn't interesting. But she had her legs and her ass and her hair and her youth. I'd met some interesting women, God knows, but Mercedes just wasn't high on the list.

The beer flowed and the joints went around. Mercedes still had the same job with the Hollywood Institute of Human Relationships. She was having trouble with her car. Little Jack had a short fat dick. She was reading Grapefruit by Yoko Ono.

She was tired of abortions. The Valley was nice but she missed Venice. She missed riding her bicycle along the boardwalk.

I don't know how long we talked, or she talked, but much, much later she said she was too drunk to drive home.

"Take off your clothes and go to bed," I told her.

"But no fucking," she said.

"I won't touch your cunt."

She undressed and went to bed. I undressed and went into the bathroom. She watched me coming out with a jar of Vaseline.

"What are you going to do?"

"Just take it easy, baby, take it easy."

I rubbed the Vaseline on my cock. Then I turned out the light and got into bed.

"Turn your back," I said.

I reached one arm under her and played with one breast and reached over the top and played with the other breast. It felt good with my face in her hair. I stiffened and slipped it into her ass. I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her ass toward me, hard, sliding it in. "Ooooooohh," she said.

I began working. I dug it in deeper. The cheeks of her ass were big and soft. As I slammed away I began to sweat. Then I rolled her on her stomach and sunk it in deeper. It was getting tighter. I nudged into the end of her colon and she screamed.

"Shut up! Goddamn you!"

She was very tight. I slipped it even further in. Her grip was unbelievable. As I rammed it in I suddenly got a stitch in my side, a terrible burning pain, but I continued. I was slicing her in half, right up the backbone. I roared like a madman and came.

Then I lay there on top of her. The pain in my side was murder. She was crying.

"Goddamn it," I asked her, "what's the matter? I didn't touch your cunt."

I rolled off.

In the morning Mercedes said very little, got dressed and left for her job.

Well, I thought, there goes another one.

73

My drinking slowed down the next week. I went to the racetrack to get fresh air and sunshine and plenty of walking. At night I drank, wondering why I was still alive, how the scheme worked. I thought about Katherine, about Lydia, about Tammie. I didn't feel very good.

That Friday night the phone rang. It was Mercedes.

"Hank, I'd like to come by. But just for talk and beer and joints. Nothing else."

"Come by if you want to."

Mercedes was there in a half hour. To my surprise she looked very good to me. I'd never seen a mini-skirt as short as hers and her legs looked fine. I kissed her happily. She broke away.

"I couldn't walk for two days after that last one. Don't rip my butt again."

"All right, honest injun, I won't."

It was about the same. We sat on the couch with the radio on, talked, drank beer, smoked. I kissed her again and again. I couldn't stop. She acted like she wanted it, yet she insisted that she couldn't. Little Jack loved her, love meant a lot in this world.

"It sure does," I said.

"You don't love me."

"You're a married woman."

"I don't love Little Jack, but I care for him very much and he loves me."

"It sounds fine."

"Have you ever been in love?"

"Four times."

"What happened? Where are they tonight?"

"One is dead. The other three are with other men."

We talked a long time that night and smoked any number of joints. Around 2 am Mercedes said, "I'm too high to drive home.

I'd total the car."

"Take your clothes off and go to bed."

"All right, but I've got an idea."

"Like what?"

"I want to watch you beat that thing off! I want to watch it squirt!"

"All right, that's fair enough. It's a deal."

Mercedes undressed and went to bed. I undressed and stood at the side of the bed. "Sit up so you can see better."

Mercedes sat on the edge of the bed. I spit on my palm and began to rub my cock.

"Oh," Mercedes said, "It's growing!"

"Uh huh… ."

"It's getting big!"

"Uh huh… ."

"Oh, it's all purple with big veins! It throbs! It's ugly!"

"Yeh."

As I kept beating my cock I moved it near her face. She watched it. Just as I was about to come I stopped.

"Oh," she said.

"Look, I've got a better idea… ."

"What?"

"You beat it off."

"All right."

She started in. "Am I doing it right?"

"A little harder. And spit on your palm. And rub almost all of it, most of it, just not up near the head."

"All right… . Oh, God, look at it. … I want to see it squirt juice!"

"Keep going, Mercedes! OH, MY GOD!"

I was just about to come. I pulled her hand away from my cock.

"Oh, damn you!" Mercedes said.

She bent forward and got it in her mouth. She began sucking and bobbing, running her tongue along the length of my cock as she sucked it.

"Oh, you bitch!"

Then she pulled her mouth off my cock.

"Go ahead! Go ahead! Finish me off!"

"No!"

"Well, goddamn it then!"

I pushed her over backwards on the bed and leaped on her. I kissed her viciously and drove my cock in. I worked violently, pumping and pumping. I moaned and then came. I pumped it into her, feeling it enter, feeling it steam into her.

74

I had to fly to Illinois to give a reading at the University. I hated readings, but they helped with the rent and maybe they helped sell books. They got me out of east Hollywood, they got me up in the air with the businessmen and the stewardesses and the iced drinks and little napkins and the peanuts to kill the breath.

I was to be met by the poet, William Keesing, who I had been corresponding with since 1966. I had first seen his work in the pages of Bull, edited by Doug Fazzick, one of the first mimeo mags and probably the leader in the mimeo revolution. None of us were literary in the proper sense: Fazzick worked in a rubber plant, Keesing was an ex-Marine out of Korea who had done time and was supported by his wife, Cecelia. I was working 11 hours a night as a postal clerk. That was also the time when Marvin arrived on the scene with his strange poems about demons. Marvin Woodman was the best damned demon-writer in America. Maybe in Spain and Peru too. I was into writing letters at the time. I wrote 4 and 5 page letters to everybody, coloring the envelopes and pages wildly with crayons. That's when I began writing William Keesing, ex-Marine, ex-con, drug addict (he was mostly into codeine).

Now, years later, William Keesing had secured a temporary teaching job at the University. He had managed to pick up a degree or two between drug busts. I warned him that it was a dangerous job for anybody who wanted to write. But at least he taught his class plenty of Chinaski.

Keesing and his wife were waiting at the airport. I had my baggage with me and so we went right to the car.

"My God," said Keesing, "I never saw anybody get off of an airplane looking like that."

I had on my dead father's overcoat, which was too large. My pants were too long, the cuffs came down over the shoes and that was good because my stockings didn't match, and my shoes were down at the heels. I hated barbers so I cut my own hair when I couldn't get a woman to do it. I didn't like to shave and I didn't like long beards, so I scissored myself every two or three weeks. My eyesight was bad but I didn't like glasses so I didn't wear them except to read. I had my own teeth but not that many. My face and my nose were red from drinking and the light hurt my eyes so I squinted through tiny slits. I would have fit into any skid row anywhere.

We drove off.

"We expected somebody quite different," said Cecelia.

"Oh?"

"I mean, your voice is so soft, and you seem gentle. Bill expected you to get off the plane drunk and cursing, making passes at the women. …"

"I never pump up my vulgarity. I wait for it to arrive on its own terms."

"You're reading tomorrow night," said Bill.

"Good, we'll have fun tonight and forget everything."

We drove on.

That night Keesing was as interesting as his letters and poems. He had the good sense to stay away from literature in our conversation, except now and then. We talked about other things. I didn't have much luck in person with most poets even when their letters and poems were good. I'd met Douglas Fazzick with less than charming results. It was best to stay away from other writers and just do your work, or just not do your work.

Cecelia retired early. She had a job to go to in the morning. "Cecelia is divorcing me," Bill told me. "I don't blame her. She's sick of my drugs, my puke, my whole thing. She's stood it for years. Now she can't take it any longer. I can't give her much of a fuck anymore. She's running with this teenage kid. I can't blame her. I've moved out, I've got a room. We can go there and sleep or I can go there and sleep and you can stay here or we both can stay here, it doesn't matter to me."

Keesing took out a couple of pills and dropped them.

"Let's both stay here," I said.

"You really pour the drinks down."

"There's nothing else to do."

"You must have a cast-iron gut."

"Not really. It busted open once. But when those holes grow back together they say it's tougher than the best welding."

"How long you figure to go on?" he asked.

"I've got it all planned. I'm going to die in the year 2000 when I'm 80."

"That's strange," said Keesing, "That's the year I'm going to die. 2000. I even had a dream about it. I even dreamed the day and hour of my death. Anyhow, it's in the year 2000."

"It's a nice round number. I like it."

We drank for another hour or two. I got the extra bedroom. Keesing slept on the couch. Cecelia apparently was serious about dumping him.

The next morning I was up at 10:30 am. There was some beer left. I managed to get one down. I was on the second when Keesing walked in.

"Jesus, how do you do it? You spring back like an 18 year old boy."

"I have some bad mornings. This just isn't one."

"I've got a 1:00 English class. I've got to get straight."

"Drop a white."

"I need some food in my gut."

"Eat two soft-boiled eggs. Eat them with a touch of chili powder or paprika."

"Can I boil you a couple?"

"Thanks, yes."

The phone rang. It was Cecelia. Bill talked a while, then hung up. "There's a tornado approaching. One of the biggest in the history of the state. It might come through here."

"Something always happens when I read."

I noticed it was beginning to get dark.

"They might cancel the class. It's hard to tell. I better eat."

Bill put the eggs on.

"I don't understand you," he said, "you don't even look hungover."

"I'm hungover every morning. It's normal. I've adjusted."

"You're still writing pretty good shit, in spite of all that booze."

"Let's not get on that. Maybe it's the variety of pussy. Don't boil those eggs too long."

I went into the bathroom and took a shit. Constipation wasn't one of my problems. I was just coming out when I heard Bill holler, "Chinaski!"

Then I heard him in the yard, he was vomiting. He came back.

The poor guy was really sick.

"Take some baking soda. You got a Valium?"

"No."

"Then wait 10 minutes after the baking soda and drink a warm beer. Pour it in a glass now so the air can get to it."

"I got a bennie."

"Take it."

It was getting darker. Fifteen minutes after the bennie Bill took a shower. When he came out he looked all right. He ate a peanut butter sandwich with sliced banana. He was going to make it.

"You still love your old lady, don't you?" I asked.

"Christ, yes."

"I know it doesn't help, but try to realize that it's happened to all of us, at least once."

"That doesn't help."

"Once a woman turns against you, forget it. They can love you, then something turns in them. They can watch you dying in a gutter, run over by a car, and they'll spit on you."

"Cecelia's a wonderful woman."

It was getting darker. "Let's drink some more beer," I said.

We sat and drank beer. It got really dark and then there was a high wind. We didn't talk much. I was glad we had met. There was very little bullshit in him. He was tired, maybe that helped. He'd never had any luck with his poems in the U.S.A. They loved him in Australia. Maybe some day they'd discover him here, maybe not. Maybe by the year 2000. He was a tough, chunky little guy, you knew he could duke it, you knew he had been there. I was fond of him.

We drank quietly, then the phone rang. It was Cecelia again. The tornado had passed over, or rather, around. Bill was going to teach his class. I was going to read that night. Bully. Everything was working. We were all fully employed.

About 12:30 pm Bill put his notebooks and whatever he needed into a backpack, got on his bike and pedaled off to the university.

Cecelia came home sometime in the mid-afternoon. "Did Bill get off all right?" "Yes, he left on the bike. He looked fine." "How fine? Was he on shit?" "He looked fine. He ate and everything." "I still love him, Hank. I just can't go through it anymore." "Sure."

"You don't know how much it means to him to have you out here. He used to read your letters to me." "Dirty, huh?"

"No, funny. You made us laugh." "Let's fuck, Cecelia." "Hank, now you're playing your game." "You're a plump little thing. Let me sink it in." "You're drunk, Hank." "You're right. Forget it."

75

That night I gave another bad reading. I didn't care. They didn't care. If John Cage could get one thousand dollars for eating an apple, I'd accept $500 plus air fare for being a lemon.

It was the same afterwards. The little coeds came up with their young hot bodies and their pilot-light eyes and asked me to autograph some of my books. I would have liked to fuck about five of them in one night sometime and get them out of my system forever.

A couple of professors came up and grinned at me for being an ass. It made them feel better, they felt now as if they had a chance at the typewriter.

I took the check and got out. There was to be a small, select gathering at Cecelia's house afterwards. That was part of the unwritten contract. The more girls the better, but at Cecelia's house I stood very little chance. I knew that. And sure enough, in the morning I awakened in my bed, alone.

Bill was sick again the next morning. He had another 1:00 class and before he went off he said, "Cecelia will drive you to the airport. I'm going now. No heavy goodbyes."

"All right."

Bill put on his backpack and walked his bike out the door.

76

I was back in L.A. about a week and a half. It was night. The phone rang. It was Cecelia, she was sobbing. "Hank, Bill is dead. You're the first one I've called."

"Christ, Cecelia, I don't know what to say."

"I'm so glad you came when you did. Bill did nothing but talk about you after you left. You don't know what your visit meant to him."

"What happened?"

"He complained of feeling real bad and we took him to a hospital and in two hours he was dead. I know people are going to think he o.d.'d, but he didn't. Even though I was going to divorce him I loved him."

"I believe you."

"I don't want to bother you with all this."

"It's all right, Bill would understand. I just don't know what to say to help you. I'm kind of in shock. Let me phone you later on to see if you're all right."

"Would you?"

"Of course."

That's the problem with drinking, I thought, as I poured myself a drink. If something bad happens you drink in an attempt to forget; if something good happens you drink in order to celebrate; and if nothing happens you drink to make something happen.

As sick and unhappy as he was, Bill just didn't look like somebody who was about to die. There were many deaths like that and even though we knew about death and thought about it almost every day, when there was an unexpected death, and when that person was an exceptional and lovable human being, it was hard, very, no matter how many other people had died, good, bad or unknown.

I phoned Cecelia back that night, and I phoned her again the next night, and once more after that, and then I stopped phoning.

77

A month went by. R.A. Dwight, the editor of Dogbite Press wrote and asked me to do a foreword to Keesing's Selected Poems. Keesing, with the help of his death, was at last going to get some recognition somewhere besides Australia.

Then Cecelia phoned. "Hank, I'm going to San Francisco to see R.A. Dwight. I have some photos of Bill and some unpublished things. I want to go over them with Dwight and we're going to decide what to publish. But first I want to stop in L.A. for a day or two. Can you meet me at the airport?"

"Sure, you can stay at my place, Cecelia."

"Thanks much."

She gave me her arrival time and I went in and cleaned the toilet, scrubbed the bathtub and changed the sheets and pillow cases on my bed.

Cecelia arrived on the 10 am flight which was hell for me to make, but she looked good, albeit a bit plump. She was sturdy, built low, she looked midwestern, scrubbed. Men looked at her, she had a way of moving her behind; it looked forceful, a bit ominous and sexy.

We waited for the baggage in the bar. Cecelia didn't drink. She had an orange juice.

"I just love airports and airport passengers, don't you?"

"No."

"The people seem so interesting."

"They have more money than the people who travel by rail or bus."

"We passed over the Grand Canyon on the way in."

"Yes, it's on your route."

"These waitresses wear such short skirts! Look, you can see their panties."

"Good tips. They all live in condominiums and drive M.G.s."

"Everybody on the plane was so nice! The man in the seat next to me offered to buy me a drink."

"Let's get your baggage."

"R. A. phoned to tell me that he had received your foreword to Bill's Selected Poems. He read me parts of it over the phone. It was beautiful. I want to thank you."

"Forget it."

"I don't know how to repay you."

"Are you sure you don't want a drink?"

"I rarely drink. Maybe later."

"What do you prefer? I'll get something for when we get back to my place. I want you to feel comfortable and relaxed."

"I'm sure Bill is looking down at us now and he's feeling happy."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes!"

We got the baggage and walked toward the parking lot.

78

That night I managed to get 2 or 3 drinks into Cecelia. She forgot herself and crossed her legs high and I saw some good heavy flank. Durable. A cow of a woman, cow's breasts, cow's eyes. She could handle plenty. Keesing had had a good eye.

She was against the killing of animals, she didn't eat meat. I guess she had enough meat. Everything was beautiful, she told me, we had all this beauty in the world and all we had to do was reach out and touch it, it was all there and all ours for the taking.

"You're right, Cecelia," I said. "Have another drink."

"It makes me giddy."

"What's wrong with a little bit of giddy?"

Cecelia crossed her legs again and her thighs flashed. They flashed way up high.

Bill, you can't use it now. You were a good poet, Bill, but what the hell, you left more behind than your writing. And your writing never had thighs and flanks like this.

Cecelia had another drink, then stopped. I kept going.

Where did all the women come from? The supply was endless. Each one of them was individual, different. Their pussies were different, their kisses were different, their breasts were different, but no man could drink them all, there were too many of them, crossing their legs, driving men mad. What a feast!

"I want to go to the beach. Will you take me to the beach, Hank?" Cecelia asked.

"Tonight?"

"No, not tonight. But sometime before I leave."

"All right."

Cecelia talked about how the American Indian had been abused. Then she told me that she wrote, but she never submitted it, she just kept a notebook. Bill had encouraged and helped her with some of her things. She'd helped Bill get through the university. Of course, the G.I. Bill had helped, too. And there had always been codeine, he had always been hooked on codeine. She'd threatened to leave him again and again, but it didn't help. Now— "Drink this, Cecelia," I said, "it will help you forget."

I poured her a tall one.

"Oh, I couldn't drink all that!"

"Cross your legs higher. Let me see more of your legs."

"Bill never talked to me like that."

I continued to drink. Cecelia continued to talk. After a while I didn't listen. Midnight came and left.

"Listen, Cecelia, let's go to bed. I'm bombed."

I walked into the bedroom and undressed, got under the covers. I heard her walk by and go into the bathroom. I switched the bedroom light off. She came out soon and I felt her getting into the other side of the bed.

"Goodnight, Cecelia," I said.

I pulled her to me. She was naked. Jesus, I thought. We kissed.

She kissed very well. It was a long, hot one. We finished. "Cecelia?" "Yes?"

"I'll fuck you some other time." I rolled over and went to sleep.

79

Bobby and Valerie came by and I introduced everybody around.

"Valerie and I are going to take a vacation and rent rooms by the seashore in Manhattan Beach," said Bobby. "Why don't you guys come along? We could split the rent. There are two bedrooms."

"No, Bobby, I don't think so."

"Oh, Hank, please!" said Cecelia. "I just love the ocean! Hank, if we go down there I'll even drink with you. I promise!"

"All right, Cecelia."

"Fine," said Bobby. "We leave this evening. We'll pick you guys up around 6 pm. We'll have dinner together."

"That sounds real good," said Cecelia.

"Hank's fun to eat with," said Valerie. "Last time we went out with him we walked into this fancy place and he told the head waiter right off, 'I want cole slaw and french fries for my friends here! A double order of each, and don't water the drinks or I'll have your coat and tie!'"

"I can't wait!" said Cecelia.

Cecelia wanted to go for a constitutional around 2 pm. We walked through the court. She noticed the poinsettias. She walked right up to a bush and stuck her face into the flowers, caressing them with her fingers.

"Oh, they're so beautiful!"

"They're dying, Cecelia. Can't you see how shriveled they are? The smog is killing them."

We walked along under the palms.

"And there are birds everywhere! Hundreds of birds, Hank!"

"And dozens of cats."

We drove to Manhattan Beach with Bobby and Valerie, moved into our waterfront apartment and went out to eat. The dinner was fair. Cecelia had one drink with her dinner and explained all about her vegetarianism. She had soup, salad and yogurt; the remainder of us had steaks, french fries, french bread, and salad. Bobby and Valerie stole the salt and pepper shakers, two steak knives and the tip I had left for the waiter.

We stopped for liquor, ice and smokes, then went back to the apartment. Her one drink had Cecelia giggling and talking and she was explaining that animals had souls too. Nobody challenged her opinion. It was possible, we knew. What we weren't sure of was if we had any.

80

We continued drinking. Cecelia had just one more and stopped.

“I want to go out and look at the moon and stars,” she said. “It’s so beautiful out!”

“All right, Cecelia.”

She went outside by the swimming pool and sat in.a deck chair.

“No wonder Bill died,” I said. “He starved. She never gives it away.”

“She talked the same way about you at dinner when you went to the men’s room,” said Valerie. “She said, ‘Oh, Hank’s poems are so full of passion, but as a person he’s not that way at all!’”

“Me and God don’t always pick the same horse.”

“You fucked her yet?” asked Bobby.

“No.”

“What was Keesing like?”

“All right. But I really wonder how he stood being with her. Maybe the codeine and pills helped. Maybe she was like a big flower-child-nurse to him.”

“Fuck it,” said Bobby, “let’s drink.”

“Yeah. If I had to choose between drinking and fucking I think I’d have to stop fucking.”

“Fucking can cause problems,” said Valerie.

“When my wife is out fucking somebody else I put on my pyjamas, pull the covers up and go to sleep,” said Bobby.

“He’s cool,” said Valerie.

“None of us quite know how to use sex, what to do with it,” I said. “With most people sex is just a toy—wind it up and let it run.”

“What about love?” asked Valerie.

“Love is all right for those who can handle the psychic overload. It’s like trying to carry a full garbage can on your back over a rushing river of piss."

"Oh, it's not that bad!"

"Love is a form of prejudice. I have too many other prejudices."

Valerie went to the window.

"People are having fun, jumping into the pool, and she's out there looking at the moon."

"Her old man just died," said Bobby. "Give her a break."

I took my bottle and went to my bedroom. I undressed down to my shorts and went to bed. Nothing was ever in tune. People just blindly grabbed at whatever there was: communism, health foods, zen, surfing, ballet, hypnotism, group encounters, orgies, biking, herbs, Catholicism, weight-lifting, travel, withdrawal, vegetarianism, India, painting, writing, sculpting, composing, conducting, backpacking, yoga, copulating, gambling, drinking, hanging around, frozen yogurt, Beethoven, Bach, Buddha, Christ, TM, H, carrot juice, suicide, handmade suits, jet travel, New York City, and then it all evaporated and fell apart. People had to find things to do while waiting to die. I guess it was nice to have a choice.

I took my choice. I raised the fifth of vodka and drank it straight. The Russians knew something.

The door opened and Cecelia walked in. She looked good with her low-slung powerful body. Most American women were either too thin or without stamina. If you gave them rough use something broke in them and they became neurotic and their men became sport freaks or alcoholics or obsessed with cars. The Norwegians, the Icelanders, the Finns knew how a woman should be built: wide and solid, a big ass, big hips, big white flanks, big heads, big mouths, big tits, plenty of hair, big eyes, big nostrils, and down in the center—big enough and small enough.

"Hello, Cecelia. Come on to bed."

"It was nice out tonight."

"I suppose. Come say hello."

She went into the bathroom. I switched off the bedroom light.

She came out after a while. I felt her climb into bed. It was dark but some light came in through the curtains. I handed her the fifth. She took a tiny sip, then handed the bottle back. We were sitting up, our backs against the headboard and the pillows. We were thigh to thigh.

"Hank, the moon was just a tiny sliver. But the stars were brilliant and beautiful. It makes you think, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"Some of those stars have been dead for millions of light-years and yet we can still see them."

I reached around and pulled Cecelia's head toward me. Her mouth opened. It was wet and it was good.

"Cecelia, let's fuck."

"I don't want to."

In a way I didn't want to either. Which is why I had asked.

"You don't want to? Then why do you kiss like that?"

"I think that people should take the time to get to know each other."

"Sometimes there's not that much time."

"I don't want to do it."

I got out of bed. I walked down in my shorts and knocked on Bobby and Valerie's door.

"What is it?" Bobby asked.

"She won't fuck me."

"So?"

"Let's go for a swim."

"It's late. The pool is closed."

"Closed? There's water, isn't there?"

"I mean, the lights are off."

"That's all right. She won't fuck me."

"You don't have a bathing suit."

"I have my shorts."

"All right, wait a minute… ."

Bobby and Valerie came out dressed beautifully in new tight-fitting swim suits. Bobby handed me a Columbian and I took a hit. "What's wrong with Cecelia?" "Christian chemistry."

We walked to the pool. It was true, the lights were out. Bobby and Valerie dove into the pool in tandem. I sat at the edge of the pool, my legs dangling in. I sucked from the fifth of vodka.

Bobby and Valerie surfaced together. Bobby swam over to the edge of the pool. He pulled at one of my ankles.

"Come on, shit head! Show some guts! DIVE!"

I took another hit of vodka, then set the bottle down. I didn't dive. I carefully lowered myself over the edge. Then I dropped in. It was strange in the dark water. I sank slowly towards the bottom of the pool. I was 6 feet tall and weighed 225 pounds. I waited to touch bottom and push off. Where was the bottom? There it was, and I was almost out of oxygen. I pushed off. I went back up slowly. Finally I broke the surface of the water.

"Death to all whores who keep their legs closed against me!" I screamed.

A door opened and a man came running out of a ground floor apartment. He was the manager.

"Hey, there is no swimming allowed this time of night! The pool lights are off!"

I paddled toward him, reached the pool edge and looked up at him. "Look, motherfucker, I drink two barrels of beer a day and I'm a professional wrestler. I'm a kindly sou! by nature. But I intend to swim and I want those lights turned ON! NOW! I'm only asking you one time!"

I paddled off.

The lights went on. The pool was brilliantly lit. It was magic. I paddled toward the vodka, took it down from the pool edge and had a good one. The bottle was almost empty. I looked down and Valerie and Bobby were swimming in circles around each other underwater. They were good at it, they were lithe and graceful. How odd that everybody was younger than I.

We finished with the pool. I walked to the manager's door in my wet shorts and knocked. He opened the door. I liked him.

"Hey, buddy, you can flick out the lights now. I'm through swimming. You're O.K., baby, you're O.K."

We walked back to our apartment.

"Have a drink with us," said Bobby. "I know that you're unhappy."

I went in and had two drinks.

Valerie said, "Look, Hank, you and your women! You can't fuck them all, don't you know that?" "Victory or death!" "Sleep it off, Hank." "Goodnight, folks, and thanks… ."

I went back to my bedroom. Cecelia was flat on her back and she was snoring, "Guzzz, guzzz, guzzz. …"

She looked fat to me. I took off my wet shorts, climbed into bed. I shook her.

"Cecelia, you're SNORING!"

"Oooh, oooh… . I'm sorry. …"

"O.K., Cecelia. This is just like being married. I'll get you in the morning when I'm fresh."

81

A sound awakened me. It was not quite daylight. Cecelia was moving around getting dressed.

I looked at my watch.

"It's 5 am. What are you doing?"

"I want to watch the sun come up. I love sunrises!"

"No wonder you don't drink."

"I'll be back. We can have breakfast together."

"I haven't been able to eat breakfast for 40 years."

"I'm going to watch the sunrise, Hank."

I found a capped bottle of beer. It was warm. I opened it, drank it. Then I slept.

At 10:30 am there was a knock on the door.

"Come in. …"

It was Bobby, Valerie and Cecelia.

"We just had breakfast together," said Bobby.

"Now Cecelia wants to take her shoes off and walk along the beach," said Valerie.

"I've never seen the Pacific Ocean before, Hank. It's so beautiful!"

"I'll get dressed… ."

We walked along the shoreline. Cecelia was happy. When the waves came in and ran over her bare feet she screamed. "You people go ahead," I said, "I'm going to find a bar." "I'll come with you," said Bobby. "I'll watch over Cecelia," Valerie said… .

We found the nearest bar. There were only two empty stools. We sat down. Bobby drew a male. I drew a female. Bobby and I ordered our drinks.

The woman next to me was 26, 27. Something had wearied her—her eyes and mouth looked tired—but she still held together in spite of it. Her hair was dark and well-kept. She had on a skirt and she had good legs. Her soul was topaz and you could see it in her eyes. I laid my leg against hers. She didn't move away. I drained my drink.

"Buy me a drink," I asked her.

She nodded to the barkeep. He came over.

"Vodka-7 for the gentleman."

"Thanks… ."

"Babette."

"Thanks, Babette. My name's Henry Chinaski, alcoholic writer."

"Never heard of you."

"Likewise."

"I run a shop near the beach. Trinkets and crap, mostly crap."

"We're even. I write a lot of crap."

"If you're such a bad writer, why don't you quit?"

"I need food, shelter and clothing. Buy me another drink."

Babette nodded to the barkeep and I had a new drink.

We pressed our legs together.

"I'm a rat," I told her, "I'm constipated and I can't get it up."

"I don't know about your bowels. But you're a rat and you can get it up."

"What's your phone number?"

Babette reached into her purse for a pen.

Then Cecelia and Valerie walked in.

"Oh," said Valerie, "there are those bastards. I told you. The nearest bar!"

Babette slid off her stool. She was out the door. I could see her through the blinds on the window. She was walking away, on the boardwalk, and she had a body. It was willow slim. It swayed in the wind and was gone.

82

Cecelia sat and watched us drink. I could see that I repulsed her. I ate meat. I had no god. I liked to fuck. Nature didn't interest me. I never voted. I liked wars. Outer space bored me. Baseball bored me. History bored me. Zoos bored me.

"Hank," she said, "I'm going outside for a while." "What's out there?"

"I like to watch the people swim in the pool. I like to see them enjoying themselves."

Cecelia got up and walked outside.

Valerie laughed. Bobby laughed.

"All right, so I'm not going to get into her panties."

"Do you want to?" asked Bobby.

"It's not so much my sex drive that's offended, it's my ego."

"And don't forget your age," said Bobby.

"There's nothing worse than an old chauv pig," I said.

We drank in silence.

An hour or so later Cecelia returned.

"Hank, I want to go."

"Where?"

"To the airport. I want to fly to San Francisco. I have all my luggage with me."

"It's all right with me. But Valerie and Bobby brought us down in their car. Maybe they don't want to leave yet."

"We'll drive her to L.A.," said Bobby.

We paid our bill, got into the car, Bobby at the wheel, Valerie next to him and Cecelia and me in the back seat. Cecelia leaned away from me, pressed herself against the door, as far away from me as she could get.

Bobby turned on the tape deck. The music hit the back seat like a wave. Bob Dylan.

Valerie passed back a joint. I took a hit then tried to hand it to Cecelia. She cringed away from me. I reached and fondled one of her knees, squeezed it. She pushed my hand away.

“Hey, how you guys doing back there?” Bobby asked.

“It’s love,” I replied.

We drove for an hour.

“Here’s the airport,” said Bobby.

“You’ve got two hours,” I told Cecelia. “We can go back to my place and wait.”

“That’s all right,” said Cecelia. “I want to go now.”

“But what will you do for two hours at the airport?” I asked.

“Oh,” said Cecelia, “I just love airports!”

We stopped in front of the terminal. I jumped out, unloaded her baggage. As we stood together Cecelia reached up and kissed me on the cheek. I let her walk in alone.

83

I had agreed to give a reading up north. It was the afternoon before the reading and I was sitting in an apartment at the Holiday Inn drinking beer with Joe Washington, the promoter, and the local poet, Dudley Barry, and his boyfriend, Paul. Dudley had come out of the closet and announced he was a homo. He was nervous, fat and ambitious. He paced up and down.

"You gonna give a good reading?"

"I don't know."

"You draw the crowds. Jesus, how do you do it? They line up around the block."

"They like blood-lettings."

Dudley grabbed Paul by the cheeks of the ass. "I'm gonna ream you out, baby! Then you can ream me!"

Joe Washington stood by the window. "Hey, look, here comes William Burroughs across the way. He's got the apartment right next to yours. He's reading tomorrow night."

I walked to the window. It was Burroughs all right. I turned away and opened a new beer. We were on the second floor.

Burroughs walked up the stairway, passed my window, opened his door and went in.

"Do you want to go meet him?" Joe asked.

"No."

"I'm going to see him for a minute."

"All right."

Dudley and Paul were playing grab-ass. Dudley was laughing and Paul was giggling and blushing.

"Why don't you guys work out in private?"

"Isn't he cute?" asked Dudley. "I just love young boys!"

"I'm more interested in the female."

"You don't know what you're missing."

"Don't be concerned."

"Jack Mitchell is running with transvestites. He writes poems about them."

"At least they look like women."

"Some of them look better."

I drank in silence.

Joe Washington returned. "I told Burroughs that you were in the next apartment. I said, 'Burroughs, Henry Chinaski is in the next apartment.' He said, 'Oh, is that so?' I asked if he wanted to meet you. He said, 'No.'"

"They should have refrigerators in these places," I said. "This fucking beer is getting warm."

I walked out to look for an ice machine. As I walked by Burroughs' place he was sitting in a chair by the window. He looked at me indifferently.

I found the ice machine and came back with the ice and put it in the wash basin and stuck the beers in there.

"You don't want to get too bombed," said Joe. "You really start slurring your words."

"They don't give a damn. They just want me on the cross."

"$500 for an hour's work?" asked Dudley. "You call that a cross?"

"Yeah."

"You're some Christ!"

Dudley and Paul left and Joe and I went out to one of the local coffeehouses for food and drink. We found a table. The first thing we knew, strangers were pulling chairs up to our table. All men. What shit. There were some pretty girls there but they just looked and smiled, or they didn't look and they didn't smile. I figured the ones who didn't smile hated me because of my attitude towards women. Fuck them.

Jack Mitchell was there and Mike Tufts, both poets. Neither worked for a living despite the fact their poetry paid them nothing. They lived on will power and handouts. Mitchell was really a good poet but his luck was bad. He deserved better. Then Blast Grimly, the singer, walked over. Blast was always drunk. I had never seen him sober. There were a couple of others at the table who I didn't know.

"Mr. Chinaski?"

It was a sweet little thing in a short green dress.

"Yes?"

"Would you autograph this book?"

It was an early book of poems, poems I had written while working at the post office, It Runs Around the Room and Me. I signed it and made a drawing, handed it back.

"Oh, thanks so much!"

She left. All the bastards sitting around me had killed any chance for action.

Soon there were 4 or 5 pitchers of beer on the table. I ordered a sandwich. We drank 2 or 3 hours, then I went back to the apartment. I finished the beers in the sink and went to sleep.

I don't remember much about the reading but I awakened in bed the next day, alone. Joe Washington knocked about 11 am. "Hey, man, that was one of your best readings!" "Really? You're not shitting me?" "No, you were right there. Here's the check." "Thanks, Joe."

"You're sure you don't want to meet Burroughs?" I'm sure. "He's reading tonight. You going to stay for his reading?" "I gotta get back to L.A., Joe." "You ever heard him read?" "Joe, I want to take a shower and get out of here. You're going to drive me to the airport?" "Sure."

When we left Burroughs was sitting in his chair by the window. He gave no indication of having seen me. I glanced at him and walked on. I had my check. I was anxious to make the racetrack… .

84

I had been corresponding with a lady in San Francisco for several months. Her name was Liza Weston and she survived by giving dance lessons, including ballet, in her own studio. She was 32, had been married once, and all her letters were long and typed flawlessly on pinkish paper. She wrote well, with intelligence and with very little exaggeration. I enjoyed her letters and answered them. Liza stayed away from literature, she stayed away from the so-called larger questions. She wrote me about small ordinary happenings but described them with insight and humor. And so it came about that she wrote to say that she was coming to Los Angeles to buy some dancing costumes and would I like to see her? I told her most certainly, and that she could stay at my place, but due to the difference in our ages she would have to sleep on the couch while I slept in the bed. I'll phone you when I get in, she wrote back.

Three or four days later the phone rang. It was Liza. "I'm in town," she said.

"Are you at the airport? I'll pick you up."

"I'll take a cab in."

"It costs."

"It'll be easier this way."

"What do you drink?"

"I don't much. So whatever you want… ."

I sat and waited for her. I always became uneasy in these situations. When they actually arrived I almost didn't want them to happen. Liza had mentioned that she was pretty but I hadn't seen any photographs. I had once married a woman, promised to marry her sight unseen, through the mails. She too had written intelligent letters, but my 2-and-one-half years of marriage proved to be a disaster. People were usually much better in their letters than in reality. They were much like poets in this way.

I paced the room. Then I heard footsteps coming up the court walk. I went to the blinds and peeked out. Not bad. Dark hair, neatly dressed in a long skirt that fell to her ankles. She walked gracefully, holding her head high. Nice nose, ordinary mouth. I liked women in dresses, it reminded me of bygone days. She carried a small bag. She knocked. I opened the door. "Come in."

Liza put her suitcase on the floor. "Sit down."

She had on very little makeup. She was pretty. Her hair was stylish and short.

I got her a vodka-7 and made myself one. She seemed calm. There was a touch of suffering in her face—she had been through one or two difficult periods in her life. So had I.

"I'm going to buy some costumes tomorrow. There's a shop in L.A. that's very unusual."

"I like that dress you have on. A fully covered woman is exciting, I think. Of course, it's hard to tell about her figure but one can make a judgment."

"You're like I thought you'd be. You're not afraid at all."

"Thanks."

"You seem almost diffident."

"I'm on my third drink."

"What happens after the fourth?"

"Not much. I drink it and wait for the fifth."

I walked out to get the newspaper. When I came back Liza had that long skirt hiked up to just above the knees. It looked good. She had fine knees, good legs. The day (actually the night) was brightening. From her letters I knew she was a health food addict like Cecelia. Only she didn't act like Cecelia at all. I sat at the other end of the couch and kept sneaking looks at her legs. I had always been a leg man.

"You have nice legs," I told Liza.

"You like them?"

She hitched her skirt up another inch. It was maddening. All that good leg coming out of all that cloth. It was so much better than a mini-skirt.

After the next drink I moved down next to Liza.

"You ought to come see my dance studio," she said.

"I can't dance."

"You can. I'll teach you."

"Free?"

"Of course. You're very light on your feet for a big guy. I can tell by the way you walk that you could dance very well."

"It's a deal. I'll sleep on your couch."

"I have a nice apartment but all I have is a waterbed."

"All right."

"But you have to let me cook for you. Good food."

"Sounds all right." I looked at her legs. Then I fondled one of her knees. I kissed her. She kissed me back like a lonely woman.

"Do you find me attractive?" Liza asked.

"Yes, of course. But what I like best is your style. You have a certain high tone."

"You've got a good line, Chinaski."

"I have to. I'm almost 60 years old."

"You seem more like 40, Hank."

"You have a good line too, Liza."

"I have to. I'm 32."

"I'm glad you're not 22."

"And I'm glad you're not 32."

"This is one glad night," I said.

We each sipped our drinks.

"What do you think of women?" she asked.

"I'm not a thinker. Every woman is different. Basically they seem to be a combination of the best and the worst—both magic and terrible. I'm glad that they exist, however."

"How do you treat them?"

"They are better to me than I am to them."

"Do you think that's fair?"

"Not fair, but that's the way it is."

"You're honest."

"Not quite."

"After I buy those new costumes tomorrow I want to try them on. You can tell me which one you like best."

"Sure. But I like the long type of gown. Class."

"I buy all kinds."

"I don't buy clothes until they fall apart."

"Your expenditures are of a different kind."

"Liza, I'm going to bed after this drink, all right?"

"Of course."

I had piled her bedding on the floor. "Will you have enough blankets?"

"Yes."

"Pillow O.K.?"

"I'm sure."

I finished my drink, got up and bolted the front door.

"I'm not locking you in. Feel safe."

"I do… ."

I walked into the bedroom, switched off the light, undressed, and got under the covers. "You see," I called to her, "I didn't rape you."

"Oh," she answered, "I wish you would!"

I didn't quite believe that but it was good to hear. I had played a pretty fair hand. Liza would keep overnight.

When I awakened I heard her in the bathroom. Maybe I should have slammed her? How did a man know what to do? Generally, I decided, it was better to wait, if you had any feeling for the individual. If you hated her right off, it was better to fuck her right off; if you didn't, it was better to wait, then fuck her and hate her later on.

Liza came out of the bathroom in a medium-length red dress. It fit her well. She was slim and classy. She stood in front of my bedroom mirror playing with her hair.

"Hank, I'm going to buy the costumes now. You stay in bed. You're probably sick from all that drinking."

"Why? We both drank the same."

"I heard you sneaking some in the kitchen. Why did you do that?"

"I was afraid, I guess."

"You? Afraid? I thought you were the big, tough, drinking, woman-fucker?"

"Did I let you down?"

"No."

"I was afraid. My art is my fear. I rocket off from it."

"I'm going to get the costumes, Hank."

"You're angry. I let you down."

"Not at all. I'll be back."

"Where's this shop at?"

"87th Street."

"87th Street? Great Christ, that's Watts!"

"They have the best costumes on the coast."

"It's black down there!"

"Are you anti-black?"

"I'm anti-everything."

"I'll take a cab. I'll be back in 3 hours."

"Is this your idea of vengeance?"

"I said I'd be back. I'm leaving my things."

"You'll never come back."

"I'll be back. I can handle myself."

"All right, but look … don't take a cab."

I got up and found my bluejeans, found my car keys.

"Here, take my Volks. It's TRV 469, right outside. But go easy on the clutch, and second gear is shot, especially coming back down it grinds… ."

She took the keys and I got back into bed and pulled the sheet up. Liza bent over me. I grabbed her, kissed her along the neck. My breath was bad.

"Cheer up," she said. "Trust. We'll celebrate tonight and there'll be a fashion parade." 1 can t wait.

"You will."

"The silver key opens the door on the driver's side. The gold key is the ignition. …"

She walked off in her medium-length red dress. I heard the door close. I looked around. Her suitcase was still there. And there was a pair of her shoes on the rug.

85

When I awakened it was 1:30 pm. I took a bath, got dressed, checked the mail. A letter from a young man in Glendale. "Dear Mr. Chinaski: I am a young writer and I think that I am a good one, a very good one, but my poems keep coming back. How does one break into this game? What is the secret? Who do you have to know? I very much admire your writing and I would like to come over and talk to you. I'll bring a couple of 6-packs and we can talk. I'd also like to read you some of my work. …"

The poor fucker didn't have a cunt. I threw his letter into the wastebasket.

An hour or so later Liza returned. "Oh, I've found the most marvelous costumes!"

She had an armful of dresses. She went into the bedroom. Some time passed, then she walked out. She was in a high-necked long gown and she whirled in front of me. It fit her very nicely around the ass. It was gold and black and she had on black shoes. She did a subdued dance.

"You like it?"

"Oh, yes. …" I sat and waited.

Liza went back into the bedroom. Then she came out in green and red with shots of silver. This one was a midriff job with her bellybutton showing. As she paraded in front of me she had this special way of looking into my eyes. It was neither coy nor sexy, it was perfect.

I don't remember how many costumes she showed me, but the last one was just right. It clung to her and was slit up each side of the skirt. As she walked around, first one leg came out, then the other. The dress was black, it shimmered, and it was cut low in front.

I got up as she walked across the room and grabbed her. I kissed her viciously, bending her backwards. I continued to kiss her and began pulling up her long gown. I pulled the back of the skirt all the way up and saw her panties, yellow. I pulled the front of her gown up and began pushing my cock against her. Her tongue slipped into my mouthit was as cool as if she had been drinking ice water. I walked her backwards into the bedroom, pushed her on to the bed and mauled her. I got those yellow panties off and got my own pants off. I let my imagination go. Her legs were around my neck as I stood over her. I spread her legs apart, moved up, and slid it in. I played around a little, using different speeds, then anger thrusts, thrusts of love, teasing thrusts, brutal thrusts. I would pull out from time to time, then begin again. Finally I let go, gave her the last few strokes, came, and sank down beside her.

Liza continued to kiss me. I wasn't sure whether she had gotten off or not. I had.

We had dinner at a French place that also served good American food at fair prices. It was always overcrowded which gave us time at the bar. That night I left my name as Lancelot Lovejoy, and I was even sober enough to recognize the call 45 minutes later.

We ordered a bottle of wine. We decided to hold off dinner for a while. There isn't a better way to drink than at a small table over a white tablecloth with a good-looking woman.

"You fuck," Liza told me, "with the enthusiasm of a man who is fucking for the first time and yet you fuck with a lot of inventiveness."

"May I write that down on my sleeve?"

"Sure."

"I might use it sometimes."

"Just don't use me, that's all I ask. I don't want to be just another one of your women."

I didn't answer.

"My sister hates you," she said. "She said that all you'll do is use me."

"What happened to your class, Liza? You're talking just like everybody else."

We never got around to dinner. When we got back home we drank some more. I did like her very much. I began to abuse her a bit, verbally. She looked surprised, her eyes filled with tears. She ran to the bathroom, stayed 10 minutes or so, then came out.

"My sister was right. You're a bastard!"

"Let's go to bed, Liza."

We got ready for bed. We got into bed and I mounted her. Without foreplay it was much more difficult but I finally got it in. I began to work. I worked and I worked. It was another hot night. It was like a recurring bad dream. I began sweating. I humped and I pumped. It wouldn't go down, it wouldn't come off. I pumped and I humped. Finally I rolled off. "Sorry, baby, too much to drink."

Liza slowly slid her head down my chest, across my belly, down, got to it, began licking and licking and licking, then took it into her mouth and worked on it… .

I flew back to San Francisco with Liza. She had an apartment at the top of a steep hill. It was nice. The first thing I had to do was crap. I went into the bathroom and sat down. Green vines all around. What a pot. I liked it. When I came out Liza sat me down on some big pillows, put Mozart on the machine, and poured me a chilled wine. It was dinner time and she stood in the kitchen cooking. Every now and then she poured me another wine. I always enjoyed being at women's places more than when they were at mine. When I was at their places I could always leave.

She called me in to dinner. There was salad, iced tea and a chicken stew. It was quite good. I was a terrible cook. All I could fry were steaks, although I made a good beef stew, especially when drunk. I liked to gamble with my beef stews. I put almost everything into them and sometimes got away with it.

After dinner we took a ride to Fisherman's Wharf. Liza drove her car with great caution. It made me nervous. She would stop at a cross street and look in both directions for traffic. When there wasn't any she still sat there. I waited.

"Liza, shit, let's go. There isn't anybody around."

Then she would go. That was the way it was with people. The longer you knew them the more their eccentricities showed. Sometimes their eccentricities were humorous—in the beginning.

We walked along the wharf, then went and sat on the sand. It wasn't much of a beach.

She told me she hadn't had a boyfriend in some time. What the men she had known talked about, what was important to them, she found unbelievable.

"Women are much the same," I told her. "When they asked Richard Burton what was the first thing he looked for in a woman, he said, 'She must be at least 30 years old.'"

It got dark and we went back to her apartment. Liza brought out the wine and we sat on pillows. She opened the shutters and we looked out on the night. We began kissing. Then we drank. And kissed some more.

"When are you going back to work?" I asked her.

"Do you want me to?"

"No, but you have to live."

"But you're not working."

"In a way, I am."

"You mean you live in order to write?"

"No, I just exist. Then later I try to remember and write some of it down."

"I only run my dance studio three nights a week."

"You make ends meet that way?"

"So far I have."

We became more involved with kissing. She didn't drink as much as I did. We moved to the waterbed, undressed and got to it. I'd heard about waterbed fucks. They were supposed to be great. I found it difficult. The water shuddered and shook beneath us, and as I was moving down, the water seemed to be rocking from side to side. Instead of bringing her to me, it seemed to take her away from me. Maybe I needed practice. I went into my savagery routine, grabbing her by the hair, thrusting as if it was a rape. She liked it, or seemed to, making little delightful sounds. I savaged her some more, then suddenly she appeared to climax, making all the right sounds. That excited me and I came just at the end of hers.

We cleaned up and went back to the pillows and the wine. Liza fell asleep with her head in my lap. I sat there an hour or so. Then I stretched out on my back and we slept that night on all those pillows.

The next day Liza took me to her dance studio. We got sandwiches from a place across the street and we took them up with our drinks to her studio and ate them. It was a very large room on a second floor. There was nothing but empty floor, some stereo equipment, a few chairs, and there were ropes strung high above, across the ceiling. I didn't know what any of it meant.

"Shall I teach you to dance?" she asked.

"Somehow I'm not in the mood," I said.

The following days and nights were similar. Not bad but not great. I learned to manage on the waterbed a bit better but I still preferred a normal bed for fucking.

I stayed 3 or 4 more days, then flew back to L.A.

We continued to write letters back and forth.

A month later she was back in L. A. This time when she walked up to my door she wore slacks. She looked different, I couldn't explain it to myself but she looked different. I didn't enjoy sitting around with her so I took her to the racetrack, to the movies, to the boxing matches, all the things I did with women I enjoyed, but something was missing. We still had sex, but it was no longer as exciting. I felt as if we were married.

After five days Liza was sitting on the couch and I was reading the newspaper when she said, "Hank, it's not working, is it?"

"No."

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know."

"I'll leave. I don't want to stay here."

"Relax, it's not that bad."

"I just don't understand it."

I didn't answer.

"Hank, drive me to the Women's Liberation Building. Do you know where it's at?"

"Yes, it's in the Westlake district where the art school used to be."

"How did you know?"

"I drove another woman there once."

"You bastard."

"O.K., now… ."

"I have a girlfriend who works there. I don't know where her apartment is and I can't find her in the phonebook. But I know she works at the Women's Lib Building. I'll stay with her for a couple of days. I just don't want to go back to San Francisco feeling like I do… ."

Liza got her things together and put them in her suitcase. We walked out to the car and I drove to the Westlake district. I had driven Lydia there once for a women's art exhibit where she had entered some of her sculpture.

I parked outside.

"I'll wait to make sure your friend is there."

"It's all right. You can go."

"I'll wait."

I waited. Liza came out, waved. I waved back, started the engine and drove off.

86

I was sitting in my shorts one afternoon a week later. There was a tender little knock on the door. "Just a moment," I said. I put on a robe and opened the door.

"We're two girls from Germany. We've read your books."

One looked to be about 19, the other maybe 22.

I had two or three books out in Germany in limited editions. I had been born in Germany in 1920, in Andernach. The house I had lived in during my childhood was now a brothel. I couldn't speak German. But they spoke English.

"Come in."

They sat on the couch.

"I'm Hilda," said the 19 year old.

"I'm Gertrude," said the 22 year old.

"I'm Hank."

"We thought your books were very sad and very funny," said Gertrude.

"Thank you."

I went in and poured 3 vodka-7s. I loaded their drinks, and I loaded mine.

"We're on our way to New York City. We thought we would stop by," said Gertrude.

They went on to say they'd been in Mexico. They spoke good English. Gertrude was heavier, almost a butterball; she was all breasts and ass. Hilda was thin, looked like she was under some kind of strain … constipated and odd, but attractive.

As I drank I crossed my legs. My robe fell apart.

"Oh," said Gertrude, "you have sexy legs!"

"Yes," said Hilda.

"I know it," I said.

The girls stayed right along with me on the drinks. I went and concocted three more. When I sat down again I made sure that my robe covered me properly.

"You girls can stay here for a few days, rest up."

They didn't answer.

"Or you don't have to stay," I said. "It's all right. We can just talk awhile. I don't want to make any demands on you."

"I'll bet you know a lot of women," said Hilda. "We've read your books."

"I write fiction."

"What's fiction?"

"Fiction is an improvement on life."

"You mean you lie?" asked Gertrude.

"A little. Not too much."

"Do you have a girlfriend?" asked Hilda.

"No. Not now."

"We'll stay," said Gertrude.

"There's only one bed."

"That's all right."

"Just one other thing …"

"What?"

"I must sleep in the middle."

"That's all right."

I kept mixing drinks and soon we ran out. I phoned the liquor store. "I want …"

"Wait, my friend," he said, "we don't start making home deliveries until 6 pm."

"Really? I push $200 a month down your throat… ."

"Who is this?"

"Chinaski."

"Oh, Chinaski… . What is it you wanted?"

I told the man. Then, "You know how to get here?"

"Oh, yes."

He arrived in 8 minutes. It was the fat Australian who was always sweating. I took the two cartons and set them on a chair.

"Hello, ladies," said the fat Australian.

They didn't answer.

"What's the bill, Arbuckle?"

"Well, it comes to $17.94."

I gave him a twenty. He started digging for change.

"You know better than that. Buy yourself a new home."

"Thank you, sir!"

Then he leaned toward me and asked in a lower voice, "My God, how do you do it?"

"Typing," I said.

"Typing?"

"Yes, about 18 words a minute."

I pushed him back outside and closed the door.

That night I got in bed with them, with me in between. We were all drunk and first I grabbed one and kissed and fondled her, then I turned and grabbed the other. I went back and forth and it was very rewarding. Later I concentrated on one for a long time, then turned and went to the other. Each waited patiently. I was confused. Gertrude was hotter, Hilda was younger. I reamed butt, laid on top of each of them but didn't stick it in. I finally decided on Gertrude. But I couldn't do it. I was too drunk. Gertrude and I went to sleep, her hand holding my cock, my hands on her breasts. My cock went down, her breasts remained firm.

It was very hot the next day and there was more drinking. I phoned out for food. I turned the fan on. There wasn't much talking. Those German girls liked their drinks. Then they both went out and sat on the old couch on my front porch—Hilda in shorts and bra and Gertrude in a tight pink underslip without bra or panties. Max, the mailman, came by. Gertrude accepted my mail for me. Poor Max nearly fainted. I could see the envy and disbelief in his eyes. But, then, he had job security… .

Around 2 pm Hilda announced that she was going for a walk. Gertrude and I went inside. Finally it did happen. We were on the bed and we played our openers. After a while we got down to it. I mounted and it went in. But it went in sharply to the left, like there was a curve. I could only remember one other woman like that—but it had been good. Then I got to thinking, she's fooling me, I'm not really in there. So I pulled it out and stuck it back in. It went in and took a hard left turn again. What shit. Either she had a fucked up pussy or I wasn't penetrating. I persuaded myself to believe she had a fucked up pussy. I pumped and worked while it bent around that hard left turn.

I worked and worked. Then it felt as if I were hitting bone. It was shocking. I gave up and rolled off.

"Sorry," I said, "I just don't seem to have it today."

Gertrude didn't answer.

We both got up and dressed. Then we went into the front room and sat and waited on Hilda. We drank and waited. Hilda took a long time. A long, long time. She finally arrived.

"Hello," I said.

"Who are all these black men in your neighborhood?" she asked.

"I don't know who they are."

"They said I could make $2,000 a week."

"Doing what?"

"They didn't say."

The German girls stayed 2 or 3 days more. I still kept hitting that left turn in Gertrude even when I was sober. Hilda told me she was on Tampax, so she was no help.

They finally collected their things and I got them into my car. They had large canvas bags that they carried over their shoulders. German hippies. I followed their instructions. Turn here, turn there. We climbed higher and higher into the Hollywood Hills. We were in rich territory. I had forgotten that some people lived quite well while most others ate their own shit for breakfast. When you lived where I lived you began to believe that every place else was like your own crummy place.

"Here it is," said Gertrude.

The Volks was at the bottom of a long winding driveway. Up there somewhere was a house, a large, large house with all the things in it, and around it, that such houses have.

"You had better let us walk up," said Gertrude.

"Sure," I said.

They got out. I turned the Volks around. They stood at the entrance and waved to me, their canvas backpacks slung over their shoulders. I waved back. Then I drove off, put it into neutral, and glided down out of the mountains.

87

I was asked to give a reading at a famous nightclub, The Lancer, on Hollywood Boulevard. I agreed to read two nights. I was to follow a rock group, The Big Rape, each night. I was getting sucked into the show biz maze. I had some extra tickets and I phoned Tammie and asked her if she wanted to come. She said yes, so the first night I took her with me. I had them put her on the tab. We sat in the bar waiting for my act to go on. Tammie's act was similar to mine. She promptly got drunk and walked up and down in the bar talking to people.

By the time I was ready to go on Tammie was falling over tables. I found her brother and told him, "Jesus Christ, get her out of here, will you?"

He led her off into the night. I was drunk, too, and later on I forgot that I had asked that she be taken away.

I didn't give a good reading. The audience was strictly into rock, and they missed lines and meanings. But some of it was my fault too. I sometimes lucked out with rock crowds, but that particular night I didn't. I was disturbed by Tammie's absence, I think. When I got home I phoned her number. Her mother answered. "Your daughter," I told her, "is SCUM!"

"Hank, I don't want to hear that."

She hung up.

The next night I went alone. I sat at a table in the bar and drank. An elderly, dignified woman came up to my table and introduced herself. She taught English literature and had brought one of her pupils, a little butterball called Nancy Freeze. Nancy appeared to be in heat. They wanted to know if I would answer some questions for the class.

"Shoot."

"Who was your favorite author?"

"Fante."

"Who?"

"John F—a—n—t—e. Ask the Dust. Wait Until Spring, Bandini."

"Where can we find his books?"

"I found them in the main library, downtown. Fifth and Olive, isn't it?"

"Why did you like him?"

"Total emotion. A very brave man."

"Who else?"

"Celine."

"Why?"

"They ripped out his guts and he laughed, and he made them laugh too. A very brave man."

"Do you believe in bravery?"

"I like to see it anywhere, in animals, birds, reptiles, humans."

"Why?"

"Why? It makes me feel good. It's a matter of style in the face of no chance at all."

"Hemingway?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Too grim, too serious. A good writer, fine sentences. But for him, life was always total war. He never let go, he never danced."

They folded up their notebooks and vanished. Too bad. I had meant to tell them that my real influences were Gable, Cagney, Bogart and Errol Flynn.

Next thing I knew I was sitting with three handsome women, Sara, Cassie, and Debra. Sara was 32,3 classy wench, good style and a heart. She had red-blond hair that fell straight down, and she had wild eyes, slightly insane. She also carried an overload of compassion that was real enough and which obviously cost her something. Debra was Jewish with large brown eyes and a generous mouth, heavily smeared with blood-red lipstick. Her mouth glistened and beckoned to me. I guessed she was somewhere between 30 and 35, and she reminded me of how my mother looked in 1935 (although my mother had been much more beautiful). Cassie was tall with long blond hair, very young, expensively dressed, modish, hip, "in," nervous, beautiful. She sat closest to me, squeezing my hand, rubbing her thigh against mine. As she squeezed my hand I became aware that her hand was much larger than mine. (Although I am a large man I am embarrassed by my small hands. In my barroom brawls as a young man in Philadelphia I had quickly found out the importance of hand size. How I had managed to win 30 percent of my fights was amazing.) Anyway, Cassie felt she had an edge on the other two, and I wasn't sure but that I agreed.

Then I had to read, and I had a luckier night. It was the same crowd, but my mind was on my work. The crowd got warmer and warmer, wilder and enthusiastic. Sometimes it was them who made it happen, sometimes it was you. Usually the latter. It was like climbing into the prize ring: you should feel you owed them something or you shouldn't be in there. I jabbbed and crossed and shuffled, and in the last round I really opened up and knocked out the referee. Performance is performance. Because I had bombed the night before my success must have seemed very strange to them. It certainly seemed strange to me.

Cassie was waiting in the bar. Sara slipped me a love note with her phone number. Debra was not as inventive—she just wrote down her phone number. For a moment—strangely—I thought about Katherine, then I bought Cassie a drink. I'd never see Katherine again. My little Texas girl, my beauty of beauties. Goodbye, Katherine.

"Look, Cassie, can you drive me home? I'm too drunk to drive. One more drunk driving rap and I've had it."

"All right, I'll drive you home. How about your car?"

"Fuck it. I'll leave it."

We left together in her M.G. It was like a movie. At any moment I expected her to drop me off at the next corner. She was in her mid-twenties. She talked as we drove. She worked for a music company, loved it, didn't have to be at work until

10:30 am and she left at 3 pm. “Not bad,” she said, “and I like it. I can hire and fire, I’ve moved up, but I haven’t had to fire anybody yet. They’re good folks and we’ve put out some great records. …”

We arrived at my place. I broke out the vodka. Cassie’s hair came down almost to her ass. I had always been a hair and leg man.

“You really read well tonight,” she said. “You were a totally different person than the night before. I don’t know how to explain it, but at your best you have this … humanness. Most poets are such little prigs and shits.”

“I don’t like them either.”

“And they don’t like you.”

We drank some more and then went to bed. Her body was amazing, glorious, Playboy style, but unfortunately I was drunk. I did get it up, however, and I pumped and pumped, I grabbed her long hair, I got it out from under her and ran my hands through it, I was excited but I couldn’t finally do it. I rolled off, told Cassie goodnight, and slept a guilty sleep.

In the morning I was embarrassed. I was sure I would never see Cassie again. We dressed. It was about 10 am. We walked to the M. G. and got in. I didn’t talk, she didn’t talk. I felt the fool, but there was nothing to say. We drove back to The Lancer and there was the blue Volks.

“Thanks for all of it, Cassie. Think nice thoughts about Chinaski.”

She didn’t answer. I kissed her on the cheek and got out. She drove off in the M.G. It was, after all, as Lydia had often said, “If you want to drink, drink; if you want to fuck, throw the bottle away.”

My problem was that I wanted to do both.

88

So I was surprised when the phone rang a couple of nights later and it was Cassie.

"What are you doing, Hank?"

"Just sitting around. …"

"Why don't you come over?"

"I'd like to. …"

She gave me the address, it was either Westwood or West L. A.

"I have plenty to drink," she said. "You needn't bring anything."

"Maybe I shouldn't drink anything?"

"It's all right."

"If you pour it, I'll drink it. If you don't, I won't."

"Don't worry about it," she said.

I got dressed, jumped into the Volks, and drove to the address. How many breaks did a man have coming? The gods were good to me, of late. Maybe it was a test? Maybe it was a trick? Fatten Chinaski up, then slice him in half. I knew that might be coming too. But what can you do after a couple of 8-counts with only 2 rounds left to go?

Cassie's apartment was on the second floor. She seemed glad to see me. A large black dog leaped on me. He was huge and floppy and male. He stood with his paws on my shoulders and licked my face. I pushed him off. He stood there wiggling his butt and making begging sounds. He had long black hair and appeared to be a mongrel, but what a big one he was.

"That's Elton," said Cassie.

She went to the refrigerator and got the wine.

"This is what you should drink. I've got plenty of it."

She was dressed in an all-green gown which clung tightly to her. She was like a snake. She had on shoes sequined with green stones, and once again I noticed how long her hair was, not only long but full, there was such a mass of it. It came down at least to her ass. Her eyes were large and blue-green, sometimes more blue than green, sometimes the other way around, depending upon how the light hit them. I noticed two of my books in her bookcase, two of the better ones.

Cassie sat down, opened the wine and poured two.

"We kind of met somehow during that last encounter, we touched somewhere. I didn't want to let it go," she said.

"I enjoyed it," I said.

"Want an upper?"

"All right," I said.

She brought out two. Black cap. The best. I sent mine down with the wine.

"I've got the best dealer in town. He doesn't rip me off," she said.

"Good."

"You ever been hooked?" she asked.

"I tried coke for a while, but I couldn't stand the comedown. I was afraid to go into the kitchen the next day because there was a butcher knife in there. Besides, 50 to 75 bucks a day is beyond me.

"I've got some coke." I pass.

She poured more wine.

I don't know why, but with each new woman it seemed like the first time, almost as if I had never been with a woman before. I kissed Cassie. As I kissed her I let one hand run through all that long hair.

"Want some music?"

"No, not really."

"You knew Dee Dee Bronson, didn't you?" Cassie asked.

"Yes, we split."

"You heard what happened to her?"

"No."

"First she lost her job, then she went to Mexico. She met a retired bullfighter. The bullfighter beat the shit out of her and took her life savings, $7,000."

"Poor Dee Dee: from me to that."

Cassie got up. I watched her walk across the room. Her ass moved and shimmered under that tight green gown. She came back with papers and some grass. She rolled a joint.

"Then she got in a car crash."

"She never could drive. Do you know her well?"

"No. But we hear about things in the industry."

"Just living until you die is hard work," I said.

Cassie passed the joint. "Your life seems in order," she said.

"Really?"

"I mean, you don't come on or try to impress like some men. And you seem naturally funny."

"I like your ass and your hair," I said, "and your lips and your eyes and your wine and your place and your joints. But I'm not in order."

"You write a lot about women."

"I know. I wonder sometimes what I will write about after that."

"Maybe it won't stop."

"Everything stops."

"Let me have some of that joint."

"Sure, Cassie."

She took a hit and then I kissed her. I pulled her head back by the hair. I forced her lips open. It was a long one. Then I let her go.

"You like that, don't you?" she asked.

"To me it's more personal and sexual than fucking."

"I think you're right," she said.

We smoked and drank for several hours, then went to bed. We kissed and played. I was good and hard and I stroked her well, but after ten minutes I knew I wasn't going to make it. Too much to drink again. I began to sweat and strain. I stroked some more, then rolled off.

"I'm sorry, Cassie. …"

I watched her head move down to my penis. It was still hard. She began licking it. The dog jumped up on the bed and I kicked him off. I watched Cassie licking my cock. The moonlight came through the window and I could see her clearly. She took the end of my dick in her mouth and just nibbled at it. Suddenly she went for it all and she worked well, running her tongue up and down the length of my cock as she sucked. It was glorious.

I reached down and grabbed her hair with one hand and held it up, held it high over her head, all that hair, as she sucked on my cock. It lasted a long time but finally I could feel myself getting ready to come. She sensed it too and redoubled her efforts. I began making whimpering sounds and I could hear the big dog whimpering on the rug along with me. I liked that. I held back as long as I could to prolong the pleasure. Then, still holding and caressing her hair, I exploded in her mouth.

When I awakened the next morning Cassie was getting dressed.

“That’s all right,” she said, “you can stay. Just be sure you lock the door when you leave.”

“All right.”

After she left I took a shower. Then I found a beer in the refrigerator, drank that, dressed, said goodbye to Elton, made sure the door was locked, got into the Volks and drove back home.

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Three or four days later I found her note and phoned Debra. She said, “Come on over.” She gave me the directions to Playa del Rey and I drove over. She had a small rented house with a front yard. I drove into the front yard, got out of the car and knocked, then rang. It was one of those two-tone bells. Debra opened the door. She was as I remembered her, with enormous lipstick mouth, short hairdo, bright earrings, perfume, and almost always, that wide smile.

“Oh, come in, Henry!”

I did. There was a guy sitting there but he was obviously a homosexual so it wasn’t really an affront.

“This is Larry, my neighbor. He lives in the house in back.”

We shook hands and I sat down.

“Is there anything to drink?” I asked.

“Oh, Henry!”

“I can go get something. I would have, only I didn’t know what you wanted.”

“Oh, I have something.”

Debra went into the kitchen.

“How are you doing?” I asked Larry.

“I haven’t been doing well, but I’m doing better. I’m into self-hypnosis. It’s done marvels for me.”

“Do you want anything to drink, Larry?” asked Debra from the kitchen.

“Oh no, thanks… .”

Debra came out with two glasses of red wine. Debra’s house was over-decorated. There was something everywhere. It was expensively cluttered and there seemed to be rock music coming from every direction out of little speakers.

“Larry’s practicing self-hypnosis.”

“He told me.”

“You don’t know how much better I’m sleeping, you don’t know how much better I’m relating,” Larry said.

“Do you think everybody should try it?” asked Debra.

“Well, that would be difficult to say. But I do know that it works for me.”

“I’m throwing a Halloween party, Henry. Everybody’s coming. Why don’t you join us? What do you think he could come as, Larry?”

They both looked at me.

“Well, I don’t know,” said Larry. “Really, I don’t know. Maybe? … oh, no … I don’t think so… .”

The doorbell bing-bonged and Debra went to open it. It was another homosexual without his shirt on. He had on a wolfs mask with a big rubber tongue hanging out of the mouth. He seemed testy and depressed.

“Vincent, this is Henry. Henry, this is Vincent… .”

Vincent ignored me. He just stood there with his rubber tongue. “I had a horrible day at work. I can’t stand it there anymore. I think I’ll quit.”

“But Vincent, what would you do?” Debra asked him.

“I don’t know. But I can do a lot of things. I don’t have to eat their shit!”

“You’re coming to the party, aren’t you Vincent?”

“Of course, I’ve been preparing for days.”

“Have you memorized your lines for the play?”

“Yes, but this time I think we should do the play before we do the games. Last time, before we got to the play we were all so smashed we didn’t do the play justice.”

“All right, Vincent, we’ll do it that way.”

With that, Vincent and his tongue turned and walked out the door.

Larry stood up. “Well, I must be going too. Nice meeting you,” he said to me.

“All right, Larry.”

We shook hands and Larry walked through the kitchen and out the back door to his place.

"Larry's been a great help to me, he's a good neighbor. I'm glad you were nice to him."

"He was all right. Hell, he was here before I was."

"We don't have sex."

"Neither do we."

"You know what I mean."

"I'll go get us something to drink."

"Henry, I have plenty of everything. I knew you were coming."

Debra refilled our glasses. I looked at her. She was young, but she looked as if she was straight out of the 1930's. She wore a black skirt that came down halfway between her knee and ankle, black shoes with high heels, a white high-necked blouse, a necklace, earrings, bracelets, the lipstick mouth, plenty of rouge, perfume. She was well-built with nice breasts and buttocks and she swung them as she walked. She kept lighting cigarettes, there were lipstick-smeared butts everywhere. I felt sure I was back in my boyhood. She even didn't wear pantyhose and now and then she tugged at her long stockings, showing just enough leg, just enough knee. She was the kind of girl that our fathers loved.

She told me about her business. It had something to do with court transcripts and lawyers. It drove her crazy but she was making a good living.

"Sometimes I get very snappish with my help, but then I get over it and they forgive me. You just don't know what those goddamned lawyers are like! They want everything immediately, and they don't think about the time it takes to do it."

"Lawyers and doctors are the most overpaid, spoiled members of our society. Next in line is your corner garage mechanic. Then you might throw in your dentist."

Debra crossed her legs and her skirt hiked up.

"You have very nice legs, Debra. And you know how to dress. You remind me of the girls in my mother's day. That's when women were women."

"You've got a great line, Henry."

"You know what I mean. It's especially true of L. A. Once not long ago I left town and when I returned, do you know how I knew I was back?"

"Well, no… ."

"It was the first woman I passed on the street. She had on a skirt so short you saw the crotch of her panties. And through the front of the panties—pardon me—you could see her cunt hairs. I knew I was back in L.A."

"Where were you? On Main Street?"

"Main Street, hell. It was Beverly and Fairfax."

"Do you like the wine?"

"Yes, and I like your place. I might even move in here."

"My landlord's jealous."

"Anybody else who might be jealous?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I work hard and I just like to come home and relax in the evening. I like to decorate this place. My girlfriend—she works for me—and I are going to antique shops tomorrow morning. Do you want to come along?"

"Will I be here in the morning?"

Debra didn't answer. She poured me another drink and sat beside me on the couch. I leaned over and kissed her. As I did I pulled her skirt further back and peeked at that nylon leg. It looked good. When we finished kissing she pulled her skirt down again, but I had already memorized the leg. She got up and went to the bathroom. I heard the toilet flush. Then there was a wait. She was probably applying more lipstick. I took out my hanky and wiped my mouth. The hanky came away smeared with red. I was finally getting everything the boys in high school had gotten, the rich pretty well-dressed golden boys with their new automobiles, and me with my sloppy old clothes and broken down bicycle.

Debra walked out. She sat down and lit a cigarette.

"Let's fuck," I said.

Debra walked into the bedroom. There was a half a bottle of wine left on the coffee table. I poured myself a drink and lit one of her cigarettes. She turned off the rock music. That was nice.

It was quiet. I poured another drink. Maybe I would move in? Where would I put the typewriter?

"Henry?"

"What?"

"Where are you?"

"Wait. I just want to finish this drink."

"All right."

I finished the glass and then poured down what was left in the bottle. I was in Playa del Rey. I undressed, leaving my clothes in a messy pile on the couch. I had never been a dresser. My shirts were all faded and shrunken, 5 or 6 years old, threadbare. My pants the same. I hated department stores, I hated the clerks, they acted so superior, they seemed to know the secret of life, they had a confidence I didn't possess. My shoes were always broken down and old, I disliked shoe stores too. I never purchased anything until it was completely unusable, and that included automobiles. It wasn't a matter of thrift, I just couldn't bear to be a buyer needing a seller, seller being so handsome and aloof and superior. Besides, it all took time, time when you could just be laying around and drinking.

I walked into the bedroom with just my shorts on. I was conscious of my white belly lolling out over the shorts. But I made no effort to suck in my gut. I stood by the side of the bed, lowered my shorts, stepped out of them. Suddenly I wanted more to drink. I climbed into the bed. I got under the covers. Then I turned toward Debra. I held her. We were pressed together. Her mouth was open. I kissed her. Her mouth was like a wet cunt. She was ready. I sensed it. There would be no need of foreplay. We kissed and her tongue flicked in and out of my mouth. I caught it between my teeth, held it. Then I rolled over on top of Debra and slid it in.

I think it was the way her head was turned away to one side as I fucked her. It turned me on. Her head was turned away and bounced on the pillow with each stroke. Now and then as I was stroking I turned her head toward me and kissed that blood-red mouth. It was finally working for me. I was fucking all the women and girls I had gazed longingly after on the sidewalks of Los Angeles in 1937, the last really bad year of the depression, when a piece of ass cost two bucks and nobody had any money (or hope) at all. I'd had to wait a long time for mine. I worked and pumped. I was having a red hot useless fuck! I grabbed Debra's head once again, reached that lipstick mouth just one more time as I spurted into her, into her diaphragm.

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The next day was Saturday and Debra cooked us breakfast.

"Are you coming antique hunting with us today?"

"All right."

"Are you hungover?" she asked.

"Not too bad."

We ate in silence for a while, then she said, "I liked your reading at The Lancer. You were drunk but it came through."

"Sometimes it doesn't."

"When are you going to read again?"

"Somebody's been phoning from Canada. They're trying to raise funds."

"Canada! Can I go with you?"

"We'll see."

"Are you staying tonight?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Yes."

"I will then."

"Great… ."

We finished breakfast and I went to the bathroom while Debra did the dishes. I flushed and wiped, flushed again, washed my hands, came out. Debra was cleaning up at the sink. I grabbed her from behind.

"You can use my toothbrush if you want," she said.

"Is my breath bad?"

"It's all right."

"Like hell."

"You can also shower if you want… ."

"That too … ?"

"Stop it. Tessie won't be here for an hour. We can clear away the cobwebs."

I went and let the bathwater run. The only time I liked to shower was in a motel. In the bathroom there was a photo of a man on the wall—dark, long hair, standard, handsome face run through with the usual idiocy. He smiled white teeth at me. I brushed what was left of my discolored teeth. Debra had mentioned that her ex-husband was a shrink.

Debra showered after I was through. I poured myself a small glass of wine and sat in a chair looking out the front window. Suddenly I remembered that I had forgotten to mail my ex-woman her child support money. Oh well. I'd do it Monday.

I felt peaceful in Playa del Rey. It was good to get out of the crowded, dirty court where I lived. There was no shade, and the sun beat down mercilessly on us. We were all insane in one way or another. Even the dogs and the cats were insane, and the birds and the newsboys and the hookers.

For us, in east Hollywood, the toilets never worked properly and the landlord's cut-rate plumber could never quite fix them. We left the tank lids off and hand-manipulated the plunger. The faucets dripped, the roaches crawled, the dogs crapped everywhere, and the screens had large holes in them that let in flies and all manner of strange flying insects.

The bell bing-bonged and I got up and opened the door. It was Tessie. She was in her forties, a swinger, a redhead with obviously dyed hair.

"You're Henry, aren't you?"

"Yes, Debra's in the bathroom. Please sit down." She had on a short red skirt. Her thighs were good. Her ankles and calves weren't bad either. She looked like she loved to fuck. I walked to the bathroom and knocked on the door. "Debra, Tessie's here. …"

The first antique store was a block or two from the water. We drove down in the Volks and went in. I walked around with them. Everything was priced $800, $1500 … old clocks, old chairs, old tables. The prices were unbelievable. Two or three clerks stood around and rubbed their hands. They evidently worked on salary plus commission. The owner certainly located the items for almost nothing in Europe or the Ozark

Mountains. I got bored looking at huge price tags. I told the girls I'd wait in the car.

I found a bar across the street, went in, sat down. I ordered a bottle of beer. The bar was full of young men mostly under 25. The were blond and slim, or dark and slim, dressed in perfectly fitting slacks and shirts. They were expressionless and undisturbed. There were no women. A large television set was on. There was no sound. Nobody watched it. Nobody spoke. I finished my beer and left.

I found a liquor store and got a 6-pack. I went back to the car and sat there. The beer was good. The car was parked in the lot in back of the antique store. The street to my left was backed up with traffic and I watched the people waiting patiently in the cars. There was almost always a man and a woman, staring straight ahead, not talking. It was, finally, for everyone, a matter of waiting. You waited and you waited—for the hospital, the doctor, the plumber, the madhouse, the jail, papa death himself. First the signal was red, then the signal was green. The citizens of the world ate food and watched t.v. and worried about their jobs or their lack of same, while they waited.

I began to think about Debra and Tessie in the antique shop. I really didn't like Debra, but there I was entering her life. It made me feel like a peep-freak.

I sat drinking the beer. I was down to the last can when they finally came out.

"Oh Henry," said Debra, "I found the nicest marble top table for only $200!"

"It's really fabulous!" said Tessie.

They climbed into the car. Debra pressed her leg against mine, "Have you been bored with all this?" she asked.

I started the engine and drove to a liquor store and bought 3 or 4 bottles of wine, cigarettes.

That bitch Tessie in her short red skirt with her nylons, I thought to myself as I paid the liquor store man. I bet she has done in at least a dozen good men without even thinking about it. I decided her problem was not thinking. She didn't like to think. And that was all right because there weren't any laws or rules about it. But when she reached 50 in a few years she'd begin to think! Then she'd be a bitter woman in a supermarket, jamming her shopping cart into people's backs and ankles in the check-out line, her dark shades on, her face puffed and unhappy, her cart filled with cottage cheese, potato chips, pork chops, red onions and a quart of Jim Beam.

I went back to the car and we drove to Debra's place. The girls sat down. I opened a bottle and poured 3 glasses.

"Henry," said Debra, "I'm going to get Larry. He'll drive me down in his van to pick up my table. You needn't endure that, aren't you glad?"

"Yes."

"Tessie will keep you company."

"All right."

"You two behave yourselves now!"

Larry came in through the back door and he and Debra walked out the front. Larry warmed up the van, and they drove off.

"Well, we're alone," I said.

"Yeah," said Tessie. She sat very still, looking straight ahead. I finished my drink and went to the bathroom to take a piss. When I came out Tessie was still sitting quietly on the couch.

I walked along behind the couch. When I reached her I took her under the chin and tipped her face up. I pressed my mouth against hers. She had a very large head. She had purple makeup smeared under her eyes and she smelled like stale fruit juice, apricots. She had thin silver chains dangling from each ear and at the end of each chain hung one ball—symbolic. As we kissed I reached down into her blouse. I found a breast and cupped my hand on it and rolled it around. No brassiere. Then I straightened up and pulled my hand away. I walked around the couch and sat down next to her. I poured two drinks.

"For an ugly old son of a bitch, you've got a lot of balls," she said.

"How about a quickie before Debra gets back?"

"No."

"Don't hate me. I'm just trying to enliven the party."

"I think you stepped out of bounds. What you just did was gross and obvious."

"I guess I lack imagination."

"And you're a writer?"

"I write. But mostly I take photographs."

"I think you fuck women just in order to write about fucking them."

"I don't know."

"I think you do."

"O.K., O.K., forget it. Drink up."

Tessie went back to her drink. She finished it and put her cigarette down. She looked at me, blinking her long false eyelashes. She was like Debra with a big lipstick mouth. Only Debra's mouth was darker and didn't glisten as much. Tessie's was a bright red and her lips glistened, she held her mouth open, continually licking her lower lip. Suddenly Tessie grabbed me. That mouth opened over my mouth. It was exciting. I felt as if I was being raped. My cock began to rise. I reached down while she was kissing me and flipped her skirt back, ran my hand up her left leg as we continued to kiss.

"Come on," I said, after the kiss.

I took her by the hand and led her into Debra's bedroom. I pushed her down on the bed. The bedspread was on. I pulled off my shoes and pants, then pulled her shoes off. I kissed her a long one, then I pulled the red skirt up over her hips. No pantyhose. Nylons and pink panties. I pulled the panties off. Tessie had her eyes closed. Somewhere in the neighborhood I could hear a stereo playing symphony music. I rubbed a finger along her cunt. Soon it got wet and began to open. I sank my finger in. Then I pulled it out and rubbed the clit. She was nice and juicy. I mounted. I hit her a few swift, vicious jolts, then I went slow, then I ripped again. I looked into that depraved and simple face. It really excited me. I pounded away.

Then Tessie pushed me away. "Get off!"

"What? What?"

"I hear the van! I'll get fired! I'll lose my job!"

"No, no, you WHORE!"

I ripped away without mercy, pressed my lips against that glistening, horrible mouth and came inside of her, good. I jumped off. Tessie picked up her shoes and panties and ran to the bathroom. I wiped off with my handkerchief and straightened the bedspread, fluffed up the pillows. As I was zipping up the door opened. I walked into the front room.

"Henry, would you help Larry carry in the table? It's heavy."

"Sure."

"Where's Tessie?"

"I think she's in the bathroom."

I followed Debra out to the truck. We slid the table out of the van, grabbed it and carried it back to the house. As we came back in Tessie was sitting on the couch with a cigarette.

"Don't drop the merchandise, boys!" she said.

"No way!" I said.

We carried it into Debra's bedroom and put it by the bedside. She had another table there which she removed. Then we stood around and looked at the marble top.

"Oh, Henry … just $200 … do you like it?"

"Oh, it's fine, Debra, just fine."

I went to the bathroom. I washed my face, combed my hair. Then I dropped my pants and shorts and quietly washed my parts. I pissed, flushed, and walked back out.

"Care for a wine, Larry?" I asked.

"Oh no, but thanks… ."

"Thanks for helping, Larry," said Debra.

Larry went out the back door.

"Oh, I'm so excited!'1" said Debra.

Tessie sat and drank and talked with us for 10 or 15 minutes then she said, "I've got to go."

"Stay if you want to," said Debra.

"No, no, I've got to go. I've got to clean my apartment, it's a mess."

“Clean your apartment? Today? When you’ve got two nice friends to drink with?” asked Debra.

“I just sit here thinking about that mess over there and I can’t feel relaxed. Don’t take it personally.”

“All right, Tessie, you go now. We’ll forgive you.”

“All right, darling… .”

They kissed in the doorway and then Tessie was gone. Debra took my by the hand and led me into the bedroom. We looked at the marble tabletop.

“What do you really think of it, Henry?”

“Well, I’ve lost $200 at the track and I’ve had nothing to show for it, so I think it’s all right.”

“It will be here next to us tonight while we sleep together.”

“Maybe I ought to stand there and you can go to bed with the table?”

“You’re jealous!”

“Of course.”

Debra walked back to the kitchen and came back with some rags and some kind of cleaning fluid. She began wiping off the marble.

“You see, there is a special way to treat marble to accent the veins.”

I got undressed and sat on the edge of the bed in my shorts. Then I lay back on the pillows and on the bedspread. Then I sat up. “Oh Christ, Debra, I’m messing up your bedspread.”

“That’s all right.”

I went and got two drinks, gave one to Debra. I watched her working on the table. Then she looked at me: “You know, you have the most beautiful legs I’ve ever seen on a man.”

“Not bad for an old guy, huh, kid?”

“Not at all.”

She rubbed at the table some more, then gave it up.

“How did you get along with Tessie?”

“She’s all right. I really like her.”

“She’s a good worker.”

“I wouldn’t know about that.”

"I feel bad that she left. I think she just wanted to give us some privacy. I ought to phone her."

"Why not?"

Debra got on the phone. She talked to Tessie for quite some time. It began to get dark. What about dinner? She had the phone in the center of the bed and she was sitting on her legs. She had a nice behind. Debra laughed and then she said goodbye. She looked at me.

"Tessie says that you're sweet."

I went out for more drinks. When I got back the large color television was on. We sat side by side on the bed watching t. v. We sat with our backs to the wall, drinking.

"Henry," she asked, "what are you doing on Thanksgiving?"

"Nothing."

"Why don't you have Thanksgiving with me? I'll get the turkey. I'll have 2 or 3 friends over."

"All right, it sounds good."

Debra leaned forward and snapped the set off. She looked very happy. Then the light went off. She went to the bathroom and came out with something flimsy wrapped around her. Then she was in bed next to me. We pressed together. My cock rose. Her tongue flicked in and out of my mouth. She had a large tongue and it was warm. I went on down. I spread the hair and worked my tongue. Then I gave her a bit of a nose job. She was responding. I climbed back up, mounted her and stuck it in.

… I worked and I worked. I tried to think of Tessie in her short red skirt. It didn't help. I had given it all to Tessie. I pumped on and on.

"Sorry, baby, too much to drink. Ah, feel my heart!""

She put her hand on my chest. "It's really going," she said.

"Am I still invited for Thanksgiving?"

"Sure, my poor dear, don't worry, please."

I kissed her goodnight, then rolled away and tried to sleep.

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After Debra left for work the next morning I bathed, then tried to watch t.v. I walked around naked and noticed that I could be seen from the street through the front window. So I had a glass of grapefruit juice and dressed. Finally there was nothing to do but go back to my place. There'd be some mail, maybe a letter from someone. I made sure that all the doors were locked, then I walked out to the Volks, started it, and drove back to Los Angeles.

On the way in I remembered Sara, the third girl I had met during the reading at The Lancer. I had her phone number in my wallet. I drove home, took a crap, then phoned her.

"Hello," I said, "this is Chinaski, Henry Chinaski… ."

"Yes, I remember you."

"What are you doing? I thought I might drive out to see you."

"I have to be at my restaurant today. Why don't you come down here?"

"It's a health food place, isn't it?"

"Yes, I'll make you a good healthy sandwich."

"Oh?"

"I close at 4. Why don't you get here a little before that?"

"All right. How do I get there?"

"Get a pen and I'll give you directions."

I wrote the directions down. "See you about 3:30," I said.

About 2:30 I got into the Volks. Somewhere on the freeway the instructions got confusing or I became confused. I have a great dislike both for freeways and for instructions. I turned off and found myself in Lakewood. I pulled into a gas station and phoned Sara. "Drop On Inn," she answered.

"Shit!" I said.

"What's the matter? You sound angry."

"I'm in Lakewood! Your instructions are fucked!"

"Lakewood? Wait."

"I'm going back. I need a drink."

"Now hold on. I want to see you! Tell me what street in Lakewood and the nearest cross street."

I let the phone hang and went to see where I was. I gave Sara the information. She redirected me.

"It's easy," she said. "Now promise you'll come."

"All right."

"And if you get lost again, phone me."

"I'm sorry, you see, I have no sense of direction. I've always had nightmares about getting lost. I believe I belong on another planet."

"It's all right. Just follow my new instructions."

I got back in the car, and this time it was easy. Soon I was on the Pacific Coast Highway looking for the turn-off. I found it. It led me into a snob shopping district near the ocean. I drove slowly and spotted it: Drop On Inn, a large hand-painted sign. There were photos and small cards pasted in the window. An honest-to-god health food place, Jesus Christ. I didn't want to go in. I drove around the block and past the Drop On Inn slowly. I took a right, then another right. I saw a bar, Crab Haven. I parked outside and went in.

It was 3:45 in the afternoon and every seat was taken. Most of the clients were well on the way. I stood and ordered a vodka-7. I took it to the telephone and phoned Sara. "O.K., it's Henry. I'm here."

"I saw you drive past twice. Don't be afraid. Where are you?"

"Crab Haven. I'm having a drink. I'll be there soon."

"All right. Don't have too many."

I had that one and another. I found a small empty booth and sat there. I really didn't want to go. I hardly remembered what Sara looked like.

I finished the drink and drove to her place. I got out, opened the screen door and walked in. Sara was behind the counter. She saw me. "Hi, Henry!" she said, "I'll be with you in a minute." She was preparing something. Four or five guys sat or stood around. Some sat on a couch. Others sat on the floor. They were all in their mid-twenties, they were all the same, they were dressed in little walking shorts, and they just sat. Now and then one of them would cross his legs or cough. Sara was a fairly handsome woman, lean, and she moved around briskly. Class. Her hair was red-blond. It looked very good.

"We'll take care of you," she told me.

"All right," I said.

There was a bookcase. Three or four of my books were in it. I found some Lorca and sat down and pretended to read. That way I wouldn't have to see the guys in their walking shorts. They looked as if nothing had ever touched them—all well-mothered, protected, with a soft sheen of contentment. None of them had ever been in jail, or worked hard with their hands, or even gotten a traffic ticket. Skimmed-milk jollies, the whole bunch.

Sara brought me a health food sandwich. "Here, try this."

I ate the sandwich as the guys lolled about. Soon one got up and walked out. Then another. Sara was cleaning up. There was only one left. He was about 22 and he sat on the floor. He was gangly, his back bent like a bow. He had on glasses with heavy black rims. He seemed more lonely and daft than the others. "Hey, Sara," he said, "let's go out and have some beers tonight."

"Not tonight, Mike. How about tomorrow night?"

"All right, Sara."

He stood up and walked to the counter. He put a coin down and picked up a health food cookie. He stood at the counter eating the health food cookie. When he finished it he turned and walked out.

"Did you like the sandwich?" Sara asked.

"Yes, it wasn't bad."

"Could you bring in the table and the chairs from the sidewalk?"

I brought in the table and the chairs.

"What do you want to do?" she asked.

"Well, I don't like bars. The air is bad. Let's get something to drink and go to your place."

“All right. Help me carry the garbage out.”

I helped her carry the garbage out. Then she locked up.

“Follow my van. I know a store that stocks good wine. Then you can follow me to my place.”

She had a Volks van and I followed her. There was a poster of a man in the back window of her van. “Smile and rejoice,” he advised me, and at the bottom of the poster was his name, Drayer Baba.

We opened a bottle of wine and sat on the couch in her house. I liked the way her house was furnished. She had built all her furniture herself, including the bed. Photos of Drayer Baba were everywhere. He was from India and had died in 1971, claiming to be God.

While Sara and I sat there drinking the first bottle of wine the door opened and a young man with snaggled teeth, long hair and a very long beard walked in. “This is Ron, my roommate,” said Sara.

“Hello, Ron. Want a wine?”

Ron had a wine with us. Then a fat girl and a thin man with a shaved head walked in. They were Pearl and Jack. They sat down. Then another young man walked in. His name was Jean John. Jean John sat down. Then Pat walked in. Pat had a black beard and long hair. He sat down on the floor at my feet.

“I’m a poet,” he said.

I took a swallow of wine.

“How do you go about getting published?” he asked me.

“You submit it to the editors.”

“But I’m unknown.”

“Everybody starts out unknown.”

“I give readings 3 nights a week. And I’m an actor so I read very well. I figure if I read my stuff enough somebody might want to publish it.”

“It’s not impossible.”

“The problem is that when I read nobody shows up.”

“I don’t know what to tell you.”

“I’m going to print my own book.”

"Whitman did."

"Will you read some of your poems?"

"Christ, no."

"Why not?"

"I just want to drink."

"You talk about drinking a lot in your books. Do you think drinking has helped your writing?"

"No. I'm just an alcoholic who became a writer so that I would be able to stay in bed until noon."

I turned to Sara. "I didn't know you had so many friends."

"This is unusual. It's hardly ever like this."

"I'm glad we've got plenty of wine."

"I'm sure they'll be leaving soon," she said.

The others were talking. The conversation drifted and I stopped listening. Sara looked good to me. When she spoke it was with wit and incisjveness. She had a good mind. Pearl and Jack left first. Then Jean John. Then Pat the poet. Ron sat on one side of Sara and I sat on the other. Just the 3 of us. Ron poured himself a glass of wine. I couldn't blame him, he was her roommate. I had no hope of outwait-ing him. He was already there. I poured Sara a wine and then one for myself. After I finished drinking it I said to Sara and Ron, "Well, I guess I'll be going."

"Oh no," said Sara, "not so soon. I haven't had a chance to talk to you. I'd like to talk to you."

She looked at Ron. "You understand, don't you, Ron?"

"Sure."

He got up and walked to the back of the house.

"Hey," I said, "I don't want to start any shit."

"What shit?"

"Between you and your roommate."

"Oh, there's nothing between us. No sex, nothing. He rents the room in the back of the house."

"Oh."

I heard the sound of a guitar. Then loud singing.

"That's Ron," said Sara.

He just bellowed and called the hogs. His voice was so bad that no comment was needed.

Ron sang on for an hour. Sara and I drank some more wine. She lit some candles. “Here, have a beedie.”

I tried one. A beedie is a small brown cigarette from India. It had a good tart taste. I turned to Sara and we had our first kiss. She kissed well. The evening was looking up.

The screen door swung open and a young man walked into the room.

“Barry,” said Sara, “I’m not having any more visitors.”

The screen door banged and Barry was gone. I foresaw future problems: as a recluse I couldn’t bear traffic. It had nothing to do with jealousy, I simply disliked people, crowds, anywhere, except at my readings. People diminished me, they sucked me dry.

“Humanity, you never had it from the beginning.” That was my motto.

Sara and I kissed again. We both had drunk too much. Sara opened another bottle. She held her wine well. I have no idea what we talked about. The best thing about Sara was that she made very few references to my writing. When the last bottle was empty I told Sara that I was too drunk to drive home.

“Oh, you can sleep in my bed, but no sex.”

“Why?”

“One doesn’t have sex without marriage.”

“One doesn’t?”

“Drayer Baba doesn’t believe in it.”

“Sometimes God can be mistaken.”

“Never.”

“All right, let’s go to bed.”

We kissed in the dark. I was a kiss freak anyway, and Sara was one of the best kissers I had ever met. I’d have to go all the way back to Lydia to find anyone comparable. Yet each woman was different, each kissed in her own way. Lydia was probably kissing some son of a bitch right now, or worse, kissing his parts. Katherine was asleep in Austin.

Sara had my cock in her hand, petting it, rubbing it. Then she pressed it against her cunt. She rubbed it up and down, up and down against her cunt. She was obeying her God, Drayer Baba. I didn't play with her cunt because I felt that would offend Drayer. We just kissed and she kept rubbing my cock against her cunt, or maybe against the clit, I didn't know. I waited for her to put my cock in her cunt. But she just kept rubbing. The hairs began to burn my cock. I pulled away.

"Good night, baby," I said. And then I turned, rolled over and put my back up against her. Drayer Baby, I thought, you've got one helluva believer in this bed.

In the morning we began the rubbing bit again with the same end result. I decided, to hell with it, I don't need this kind of non-action.

"You want to take a bath?" Sara asked.

"Sure."

I walked into the bathroom and let the water run. Sometime during the night I had mentioned to Sara that one of my insanities was to take 3 or 4 steaming hot baths a day. The old water therapy.

Sara's tub held more water than mine and the water was hotter. I was five feet, eleven and 3/4 inches and yet I could stretch out in the tub. In the old days they made bathtubs for emperors, not for 5 foot bank clerks.

I got into the tub and stretched. It was great. Then I stood up and looked at my poor raw cunt-hair-rubbed cock. Rough time, old boy, but close, I guess is better than nothing? I sat back down in the tub and stretched out again. The phone rang. There was a pause.

Then Sara knocked.

"Come in!"

"Hank, it's Debra."

"Debra? How'd she know I was here?"

"She's been calling everywhere. Should I tell her to phone back?"

"No, tell her to wait."

I found a large towel and wrapped it about my waist. I walked into the other room. Sara was talking to Debra on the phone.

"Oh, here he is… ."

Sara handed me the phone. "Hello, Debra?"

"Hank, where have you been?"

"In the bathtub."

"The bathtub?"

"Yes."

"You just got out?"

"Yes."

"What are you wearing?"

"I have a towel around my middle."

"How can you keep the towel around your middle and talk on the phone?"

"I'm doing it."

"Did anything happen?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"I mean, why didn't you fuck her?"

"Look, do you think I go around doing things like that? Do you think that's all there is to me?"

"Then nothing happened?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Yes, nothing."

"Where are you going after you leave there?"

"My place."

"Come here."

"What about your legal business?"

"We're almost caught up. Tessie can handle it."

"All right."

I hung up.

"What are you going to do?" Sara asked.

"I'm going to Debra's. I said I'd be there in 45 minutes."

"But I thought we'd have lunch together. I know this Mexican place."

"Look, she's concerned. How can we sit around and chat over lunch?"

"I have my mind set on lunch with you."

"Hell, when do you feed your people?"

"I open at eleven. It's only ten now."

"All right, let's go eat. …"

It was a Mexican place in a snide hippie district of Hermosa Beach. Bland, indifferent types. Death on the shore. Just phase out, breathe in, wear sandals and pretend it's a fine world.

While we were waiting for our order Sara reached out and dipped her finger into a bowl of hot sauce, and then sucked her finger. Then she dipped again. She bent her head over the bowl. Strands of her straight hair poked at me. She kept sticking her finger into the bowl and sucking.

"Look," I told her, "other people want to use that sauce. You're making me sick! Stop it."

"No, they refill it each time."

I hoped they did refill it each time. Then the food arrived and Sara bent and attacked it like an animal, just as Lydia used to do. We finished eating and then we went out and she got into her van and drove to her health food place, and I got in my Volks and started out toward Playa del Rey. I had been given careful directions. The directions were confusing, but I followed them and had no trouble. It was almost disappointing because it seemed when stress and madness were eliminated from my daily life there wasn't much left you could depend on.

I drove into Debra's yard. I saw a movement behind the blinds. She'd been watching for me. I got out of the Volks and made sure that both doors were locked since my auto insurance had expired.

I walked up and bing-bonged Debra's bell. She opened the door and seemed glad to see me. That was all right, but it was things like that which kept a writer from getting his work done.

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I didn't do much the rest of the week. The Oaktree meet was on. I went to the track 2 or 3 times, broke even. I wrote a dirty story for a sex mag, wrote 10 or 12 poems, masturbated, and phoned Sara and Debra each night. One night I phoned Cassie and a man answered. Goodbye, Cassie.

I thought about breakups, how difficult they were, but then usually it was only after you broke up with one woman that you met another. I had to taste women in order to really know them, to get inside of them. I could invent men in my mind because I was one, but women, for me, were almost impossible to fictionalize without first knowing them. So I explored them as best I could and I found human beings inside. The writing would be forgotten. The writing would become much less than the episode itself until the episode ended. The writing was only the residue. A man didn't have to have a woman in order to feel as real as he could feel, but it was good if he knew a few. Then when the affair went wrong he'd feel what it was like to be truly lonely and crazed, and thus know what he must face, finally, when his own end came.

I was sentimental about many things: a woman's shoes under the bed; one hairpin left behind on the dresser; the way they said, "I'm going to pee ..."; hair ribbons; walking down the boulevard with them at 1:30 in the afternoon, just two people walking together; the long nights of drinking and smoking, talking; the arguments; thinking of suicide; eating together and feeling good; the jokes, the laughter out of nowhere; feeling miracles in the air; being in a parked car together; comparing past loves at 3 am; being told you snore, hearing her snore; mothers, daughters, sons, cats, dogs; sometimes death and sometimes divorce, but always carrying on, always seeing it through; reading a newspaper alone in a sandwich joint and feeling nausea because she's now married to a dentist with an

I.Q. of 95; racetracks, parks, park picnics; even jails; her dull friends, your dull friends; your drinking, her dancing; your flirting, her flirting; her pills, your fucking on the side, and her doing the same; sleeping together… .

There were no judgments to be made, yet out of necessity one had to select. Beyond good and evil was all right in theory, but to go on living one had to select: some were kinder than others, some were simply more interested in you, and sometimes the outwardly beautiful and inwardly cold were necessary, just for bloody, shitty kicks, like a bloody, shitty movie. The kinder ones fucked better, really, and after you were around them a while they seemed beautiful because they were. I thought of Sara, she had that something extra. If only there was no Drayer Baba holding up that damned STOP sign.

Then it was Sara's birthday, November nth, Veterans' Day. We had met twice again, once at her place, once at mine. There had been a high sense of fun and expectancy. She was strange but individual and inventive; there had been happiness … except in bed … it was flaming … but Drayer Baba kept us apart. I was losing the battle to God.

"Fucking is not that important," she told me.

I went to an exotic food place at Hollywood Boulevard and Fountain Avenue, Aunt Bessie's. The clerks were hateful people —young black boys and young white boys of high intelligence that had turned into high snobbery. They pranced about and ignored and insulted the customers. The women who worked there were heavy, dreamy, they wore large loose blouses and hung their heads as if in some sleepy state of shame. And the customers were grey wisps who endured the insults and came back for more. The clerks didn't lay any shit on me, so they were allowed to live another day… .

I bought Sara her birthday present, the main bit being bee secretion, which is the brains of many bees drained out of their collective domes by a needle. I had a wicker basket and in it, along with the bee secretion, were some chop sticks, sea salt, two pomegranates (organic), two apples (organic), and some sunflower seeds. The bee secretion was the main thing, and it cost plenty. Sara had talked about it quite a bit, about wanting it. But she said she couldn't afford it.

I drove to Sara's. I also had several bottles of wine with me. In fact, I had polished off one of them while shaving. I seldom shaved but I shaved for Sara's birthday, and Veterans' night. She was a good woman. Her mind was charming and, strangely, her celibacy was understandable. I mean, the way she looked at it, it should be saved for a good man. Not that I was a good man, exactly, but her obvious class would look good sitting next to my obvious class at a cafe table in Paris after I finally became famous. She was endearing, calmly intellectual, and best of all, there was that crazy admixture of red in the gold of her hair. It was almost as if I had been looking for that color hair for decades … maybe longer.

I stopped off at a bar on Pacific Coast Highway and had a double vodka-7. I was worried about Sara. She said sex meant marriage. And I believed she meant it. There was definitely something celibate about her. Yet I could also imagine that she got off in a lot of ways, and that I was hardly the first to have his cock rubbed raw against her cunt. My guess was that she was as confused as everybody else. Why I was agreeing to her ways was a mystery to me. I didn't even particularly want to wear her down. I didn't agree with her ideas but I liked her anyway. Maybe I was getting lazy. Maybe I was tired of sex. Maybe I was finally getting old. Happy birthday, Sara.

I drove up to her house and took in my basket of health. She was in the kitchen. I sat down with the wine and the basket.

"I'm here, Sara!"

She came out of the kitchen. Ron was gone but she had his stereo on full blast. I had always hated stereos. When you lived in poor neighborhoods you continually heard other people's sounds, including their fucking, but the most obnoxious thing was to be forced to listen to their music at full volume, the total vomit of it for hours. In addition they usually left their windows open, confident that you too would enjoy what they enjoyed.

Sara had Judy Garland on. I liked Judy Garland, a little, especially her appearance at the New York Met. But suddenly she seemed very loud, screaming her sentimental horseshit.

"For Christ's sake, Sara, turn it down!"

She did, but not very much. She opened one of the bottles of wine and we sat down at the table across from each other. I felt strangely irritable.

Sara reached into the basket and found the bee secretion. She was excited. She took the lid off and tasted it. "This is so powerful," she said. "It's the essence… . Care for some?"

"No, thanks."

"I'm making us dinner."

"Good. But I should take you out."

"I've already got it started."

"All right then."

"But I need some butter. I'll have to go out and get some. Also I'm going to need cucumbers and tomatoes for the store tomorrow."

"I'll get them. It's your birthday."

"Are you sure you don't want to try some bee secretion?"

"No, thanks, it's all right."

"You can't imagine how many bees it took to fill this jar."

"Happy birthday. I'll get the butter and things."

I had another wine, got in the Volks and drove to a small grocery. I found the butter, but the tomatoes and cucumbers looked old and shriveled. I paid for the butter and drove about looking for a larger market. I found one, got some tomatoes and cucumbers then drove back. As I walked up the driveway to her place I heard it. She had the stereo on full volume again. As I walked closer and closer I began to sicken; my nerves were stretched to the breaking point, then snapped. I walked into the house with just the bag of butter in my hand; I had left the tomatoes and cucumbers in the car. I don't know what she was playing; it was so loud that I couldn’t distinguish one sound from another.

Sara walked out of the kitchen. “GOD DAMN YOU!” I screamed.

“What is it?” Sara asked.

“I CAN’T HEAR!”

“What?”

“YOU’RE PLAYING THAT FUCKING STEREO TOO LOUD! DON’T YOU UNDERSTAND?”

“What?”

“I’M LEAVING!”

“No!”

I turned and banged out of the screen door. I walked out to the Volks and saw the bag of tomatoes and cucumbers I had forgotten. I picked them up and walked back up the driveway. We met.

I pushed the bag at her. “Here.”

Then I turned and walked off. “You rotten rotten rotten son-of-a-bitch!” she screamed.

She threw the bag at me. It hit me in the middle of the back. She turned and ran off into her house. I looked at the tomatoes and cucumbers scattered on the ground in the moonlight. For a moment I thought of picking them up. Then I turned and walked away.

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The reading in Vancouver went through, $500 plus air fare and lodging. The sponsor, Bart Mcintosh, was nervous about crossing the border. I was to fly to Seattle, he'd meet me there and we'd drive over the border, then after the reading I'd fly from Vancouver to L.A. I didn't quite understand what it all meant but I said all right.

So there I was in the air again, drinking a double vodka-7. I was in with the salesmen and businessmen. I had my small suitcase with extra shirts, underwear, stockings, 3 or 4 books of poems, plus typescripts of ten or twelve new poems. And a toothbrush and toothpaste. It was ridiculous to be going off somewhere to get paid for reading poetry. I didn't like it and I could never get over how silly it seemed. To work like a mule until you were fifty at meaningless, low jobs, and then suddenly to be flitting about the country, a gadfly with drink in hand.

Mcintosh was waiting at Seattle and we got in his car. It was a nice drive because neither us said too much. The reading was privately sponsored, which I preferred to university-sponsored readings. The universities were frightened; among other things, they were frightened of low-life poets, but on the other hand they were too curious to pass one up.

There was a long wait at the border, with a hundred cars backed up. The border guards simply took their time. Now and then they pulled an old car out of line, but usually they only asked one or two questions and waved the people on. I couldn't understand Mcintosh's panic over the whole procedure.

"Man," he said, "we got through!"

Vancouver wasn't far. Mcintosh pulled up in front of the hotel. It looked good. It was right on the water. We got the key and went up. It was a pleasant room with a refrigerator and thanks to some good soul the refrigerator had beer in it.

"Have one," I told him.

We sat down and sucked at the beer.

"Creeley was here last year," he said.

"Is that so?"

"It's kind of a co-op Art Center, self-sufficient. They have a big paid membership, rent space, so forth. Your show is already sold out. Silvers said he could have made a lot of money if he'd jacked the ticket prices up."

"Who's Silvers?"

"Myron Silvers. He's one of the Directors."

We were getting to the dull part now.

"I can show you around town," said Mcintosh.

"That's all right. I can walk around."

"How about dinner? On the house."

"Just a sandwich. I'm not all that hungry."

I figured if I got him outside I could leave him when we were finished eating. Not that he was a bad sort, but most people just didn't interest me.

We found a place 3 or 4 blocks away. Vancouver was a very clean town and the people didn't have that hard city look. I liked the restaurant. But when I looked at the menu I noticed that the prices were about 40 percent higher than in my part of L. A. I had a roast beef sandwich and another beer.

It felt good to be out of the U.S.A. There was a real difference. The women looked better, things felt calmer, less false. I finished the sandwich, then Mcintosh drove me back to the hotel. I left him' at the car and took the elevator up. I took a shower, left my clothes off. I stood at the window and looked down at the water. Tomorrow night it would all be over, I'd have their money and at noon I'd be back in the air. Too bad. I drank 3 or 4 more bottles of beer, then went to bed and slept.

They took me to the reading an hour early. A young boy was up there singing. They talked right through his act. Bottles clanked; laughter; a good drunken crowd; my kind of folks. We drank backstage, Mcintosh, Silvers, myself and a couple of others.

"You're the first male poet we've had here in a long time," said Silvers.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we've had a long run of fags. This is a nice change."

"Thanks."

I really read it to them. By the end I was drunk and they were too. We bickered, we snarled at each other a bit, but mostly it was all right. I had been given my check before the reading and it helped my delivery some.

There was a party afterwards in a large house. After an hour or two I found myself between two women. One was a blonde, she looked as if she was carved out of ivory, with beautiful eyes and a beautiful body. She was with her boyfriend.

"Chinaski," she said after a while, "I'm going with you."

"Wait a minute," I said, "you're with your boyfriend."

"Oh shit," she said, "he's nobody! I'm going with you!"

I looked at the boy. He had tears in his eyes. He was trembling. He was in love, poor fellow.

The girl on the other side of me had dark hair. Her body was as good but she wasn't as facially attractive.

"Come with me," she said.

"What?"

"I said, take me with you."

"Wait a minute."

I turned back to the blonde. "Listen, you're beautiful but I can't go with you. I don't want to hurt your friend."

"Fuck that son-of-a-bitch. He's shit."

The girl with dark hair pulled at my arm. "Take me with you now or I'm leaving."

"All right," I said, "let's go."

I found Mcintosh. He didn't look as if he was doing much. I guess he didn't like parties.

"Come on, Mac, drive us back to the hotel."

There was more beer. The dark girl told me her name was Iris Duarte. She was one-half Indian and she said she worked as a belly dancer. She stood up and shook it. It looked good.

"You really need a costume to get the full effect," she said.

"No, I don't."

"I mean, I need one, to make it look good, you know."

She looked Indian. She had an Indian nose and mouth. She appeared to be about 23, dark brown eyes, she spoke quietly and had that great body. She had read 3 or 4 of my books. All right.

We drank another hour then went to bed. I ate her up but when I mounted I just stroked and stroked without effect. Too bad.

In the morning I brushed my teeth, threw cold water on my face and went back to bed. I started playing with her cunt. It got wet and so did I. I mounted. I ground it in, thinking of all that body, all that good young body. She took all I had to give her. It was a good one. It was a very good one. Afterwards, Iris went to the bathroom.

I stretched out thinking about how good it had been. Iris reappeared and got back into the bed. We didn't speak. An hour passed. Then we did it all over again.

We cleaned up and dressed. She gave me her address and phone number, I gave her mine. She really seemed fond of me. Mcintosh knocked about 15 minutes later. We drove Iris to an intersection near her place of work. It turned out she really worked as a waitress; the belly-dancing was an ambition. I kissed her goodbye. She got out of the car. She turned and waved, then walked off. I watched that body as it walked away.

"Chinaski scores again," said Mcintosh, as he headed for the airport.

"Think nothing of it," I said.

"I had some luck myself," he said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I got your blonde."

"What?"

"Yes," he laughed, "I did."

"Drive me to the airport, bastard!"

I was back in Los Angeles for 3 days. I had a date with Debra that night. The phone rang. “Hank, this is Iris!”

“Oh, Iris, what a surprise! How’s it going?” “Hank, I’m flying to L.A. I’m coming to see you!” “Great! When?”

“I’ll fly down the Wednesday before Thanksgiving.” “Thanksgiving?”

“And I can stay until the following Monday!” “O.K.” “Do you have a pen? I’ll give you my flight number.”

That night Debra and I had dinner at a nice place down by the seashore. The tables weren’t crowded together and they specialized in sea food. We ordered a bottle of white wine and waited for our meal. Debra looked better than I had seen her for some time, but she told me her job was getting to be too much. She was going to have to hire another girl. And it was hard to find anybody efficient. People were so inept.

“Yes,” I said.

“Have you heard from Sara?”

“I phoned her. We had had a little argument. I sort of patched it up.”

“Have you seen her since you got back from Canada?”

“No.”

“I’ve ordered a 25 pound turkey for Thanksgiving. Can you carve?”

“Sure.”

“Don’t drink too much tonight. You know what happens when you drink too much. You become a wet noodle.”

“O.K.”

Debra reached over and touched my hand. “My sweet dear old wet noodle!”

I only got one bottle of wine for after dinner. We drank it slowly, sitting up in her bed watching her giant t.v. The first program was lousy. The second was better. It was about a sex pervert and a subnormal farmboy. The pervert’s head was transplanted onto the farmboy’s body by a mad doctor and the body escaped with the two heads and ran about the countryside doing all sorts of horrible things. It put me in a good mood.

After the bottle of wine and the two-headed boy I mounted Debra and had some good luck for a change. I gave her a long slamming gallop full of unexpected variables and inventiveness before I finally shot it into her.

In the morning Debra asked me to stay and wait for her to get home from work. She promised to cook a nice dinner. “All right,” I said.

I tried to sleep after she left but I couldn’t. I was wondering about Thanksgiving, how I was going to tell her that I couldn’t be there. It bothered me. I got up and walked the floors. I took a bath. Nothing helped. Maybe Iris would change her mind, maybe her plane would crash. I could phone Debra Thanksgiving morning to tell her I was coming after all.

I walked about feeling worse and worse. Perhaps it was because I had stayed over instead of going home. It was like prolonging the agony. What kind of shit was I? I could certainly play some nasty, unreal games. What was my motive? Was I trying to get even for something? Could I keep on telling myself that it was merely a matter of research, a simple study of the female? I was simply letting things happen without thinking about them. I wasn’t considering anything but my own selfish, cheap pleasure. I was like a spoiled high school kid. I was worse than any whore; a whore took your money and nothing more. I tinkered with lives and souls as if they were my playthings. How could I call myself a man? How could I write poems? What did I consist of? I was a bush-league de Sade, without his intellect. A murderer was more straightforward and honest than I was. Or a rapist. I didn’t want my soul played with, mocked, pissed on; I knew that much at any rate. I was truly no good. I could feel it as I walked up and down on the rug. No good. The worst part of it was that I passed myself off for exactly what I wasn’t—a good man. I was able to enter people’s lives because of their trust in me. I was doing my dirty work the easy way. I was writing The Love Tale of the Hyena.

I stood in the center of the room, surprised by my thoughts.

I found myself sitting on the edge of the bed, and I was crying. I could feel the tears with my fingers. My brain whirled, yet I felt sane. I couldn't understand what was happening to me.

I picked up the phone and dialed Sara at her health food store.

"You busy?" I asked.

"No, I just opened up. Are you all right? You sound funny."

"I'm at the bottom."

"What is it?"

"Well, I told Debra I'd spend Thanksgiving with her. She's counting on it. But now something has happened."

"What?"

"Well, I didn't tell you before. You and I haven't had sex yet, you know. Sex makes things different."

"What happened?"

"I met a belly dancer in Canada."

"You did? And you're in love?"

"No, I'm not in love."

"Wait, here's a customer. Can you hold the line?"

"All right… ."

I sat there holding the telephone to my ear. I was still naked. I looked down at my penis: you dirty son-of-a-bitch! Do you know all the heartache you cause with your dumb hunger?

I sat there for five minutes with the phone to my ear. It was a toll call. At least it would be charged to Debra's bill.

"I'm back," said Sara. "Go ahead."

"Well, I told the belly dancer when I was in Vancouver to come down and see me some time in L.A."

"So?"

"Well, I told you I already promised Debra I'd spend Thanksgiving with her… ."

"You promised me too," Sara said.

"I did?"

"Well, you were drunk. You said that like any other American you didn't like to spend holidays alone. You kissed me and asked that we might spend Thanksgiving together."

"I'm sorry, I don't remember… ."

"It's all right. Hold on … here's another customer. …"

I put the phone down and went out and poured myself a drink.

As I walked back into the bedroom I saw my sagging belly in the mirror. It was ugly, obscene. Why did women tolerate me?

I held the phone to my ear with one hand and drank wine with the other. Sara came back on.

"All right. Go ahead."

"O.K., it's like this. The belly dancer phoned the other night. Only she's not really a belly dancer, she's a waitress. She said she was flying down to L.A. to spend Thanksgiving with me. She sounded so happy."

"You should have told her you had an engagement."

"I didn't… ."

"You didn't have the guts."

"Iris has got a lovely body. …"

"There are other things in life besides lovely bodies."

"Anyway, now I have to tell Debra I can't spend Thanksgiving with her and I don't know how."

"Where are you?"

"I'm in Debra's bed."

"Where's Debra?"

"She's at work." I couldn't hold back a sob.

"You're nothing but a big-ass crybaby."

"I know. But I've got to tell her. It's driving me crazy."

"You got in this mess by yourself. You'll have to get out by yourself."

"I thought you'd help me, I thought you might tell me what to do."

"You want me to change your diapers? You want me to phone her for you?"

"No, it's all right. I'm a man. I'll phone her myself. I'm going to phone her right now. I'm going to tell her the truth. I'm going to get the fucking thing over with!"

"That's good. Let me know how it goes."

"It was my childhood, you see. I never knew what love was… ."

"Phone me back later."

Sara hung up.

I poured another wine. I couldn't understand what had happened to my life. I had lost my sophistication, I had lost my worldliness, I had lost my hard protective shell. I had lost my sense of humor in the face of other people's problems. I wanted them all back. I wanted things to go easily for me. But somehow I knew they wouldn't come back, at least not right away. I was destined to continue feeling guilty and unprotected.

I tried telling myself that feeling guilty was just a sickness of some sort. That it was men without guilt who made progress in life. Men who were able to lie, to cheat, men who knew all the shortcuts. Cortez. He didn't fuck around. Neither did Vince Lombardi. But no matter how much I thought about it, I still felt bad. I decided to get it over with. I was ready. The confessional booth. I'd be a Catholic again. Get it on, off and out, then wait for forgiveness. I finished the wine and dialed Debra's office.

Tessie answered. "Hi, baby! This is Hank! How's it going?"

"Everything's fine, Hank. How are you doing?"

"All is well. Listen, you're not pissed at me, are you?"

"No, Hank. It was a little gross, hahaha, but it was fun. It's our secret, anyhow."

"Thanks. You know, I'm really not …"

"I know."

"Well, listen, I wanted to speak to Debra. Is she there?"

"No, she's in court, transcribing."

"When will she be back?"

"She usually doesn't return to the office after she goes to court. In case she does, is there any message?"

"No, Tessie, thank you."

That did it. I couldn't even make amends. Constipation of Confession. Lack of Communication. I had Enemies in High Places.

I drank another wine. I had been ready to clear the air and let everything hang out. Now I had to sit on it. I felt worse and worse. Depression, suicide was often the lack of a proper diet. But I had been eating well. I remembered the old days, living on one candy bar a day, sending out hand-printed stories to Atlantic Monthly and Harper's. All I thought about was food. If the body didn't eat, the mind starved too. But I had been eating damned good, for a change, and drinking damned good wine. That meant that what I was thinking was probably the truth. Everybody imagined themselves special, privileged, exempt. Even an ugly old crone watering a geranium on her front porch. I had imagined myself special because I had come out of the factories at the age of 5 o and become a poet. Hot shit. So I pissed on everybody just like those bosses and managers had pissed on me when I was helpless. It came to the same thing. I was a drunken spoiled rotten fucker with a very minor minor fame.

My analysis didn't cure the burn.

The phone rang. It was Sara.

"You said you'd phone. What happened?"

"She wasn't in."

"Not in?"

"She's in court."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to wait. And tell her."

"All right."

"I shouldn't have laid all this shit on you."

"It's all right."

"I want to see you again."

"When? After the belly dancer?"

"Well, yes."

"Thanks but no thanks."

"I'll phone you. …"

"All right. I'll get your diapers laundered and ready for you."

I sipped on the wine and waited. 3 o'clock, 4 o'clock, 5 o'clock. Finally I remembered to put my clothes on. I was sitting with a drink in my hand when Debra's car pulled up in front of the house. I waited. She opened the door. She had a bag of groceries. She looked very good.

"Hi!" she said, "How's my ex-wet noodle?"

I walked up to her and put my arms around her. I started to tremble and cry.

"Hank, what's wrong?"

Debra dropped the bag of groceries to the floor. Our dinner. I grabbed her and held her to me. I was sobbing. The tears flowed like wine. I couldn't stop. Most of me meant it, the other part was running away.

"Hank, what is it?"

"I can't be with you Thanksgiving."

"Why? Why? What's wrong?"

"What's wrong is that I am a GIANT HUNK OF SHIT!"

My guilt screwed inside me and I had a spasm. It hurt something awful.

"A belly dancer is flying down from Canada to spend Thanksgiving with me."

"A belly dancer?"

"Yes."

"Is she beautiful?"

"Yes, she is. I'm sorry, I'm sorry… ."

Debra pushed me off.

"Let me put the groceries away."

She picked up the bag and walked into the kitchen. I heard the refrigerator door open and close.

"Debra," I said, "I'm leaving."

There was no sound from the kitchen. I opened the front door and walked out. The Volks started. I turned the radio on, the headlights on and drove back to L.A.

94

Wednesday night found me at the airport waiting for Iris. I sat around and looked at the women. None of them—except for one or two—looked as good as Iris. There was something wrong with me: I did think of sex a great deal. Each woman I looked at I imagined being in bed with. It was an interesting way to pass airport waiting time. Women: I liked the colors of their clothing; the way they walked; the cruelty in some faces; now and then the almost pure beauty in another face, totally and enchantingly female. They had it over us: they planned much better and were better organized. While men were watching professional football or drinking beer or bowling, they, the women, were thinking about us, concentrating, studying, deciding—whether to accept us, discard us, exchange us, kill us or whether simply to leave us. In the end it hardly mattered; no matter what they did, we ended up lonely and insane.

I had bought Iris and myself a turkey, an 18-pounder. It was on my sink, thawing out. Thanksgiving. It proved you had survived.

another year with its wars, inflation, unemployment, smog, presidents. It was a grand neurotic gathering of clans: loud drunks, grandmothers, sisters, aunts, screaming children, would-be suicides. And don't forget indigestion. I wasn't different from anyone else: there sat the 18 pound bird on my sink, dead, plucked, totally disembowled. Iris would roast it for me.

I had received a letter in the mail that afternoon. I took it out of my pocket and re-read it. It had been mailed from Berkeley: Dear Mr. Chinaski: You don't know me but I'm a cute bitch. I've been going with sailors and one truck driver but they don't satisfy me. I mean, we fuck and then there's nothing more. There's no substance to those sons of bitches. I'm 22 and I have a 5 year old daughter, Aster. I live with a guy but there's no sex, we just live together. His name is Rex. I'd like to come see you. My mom could watch Aster. Enclosed is a photo of me. Write me if you feel like it. I've read some of your books. They are hard to find in bookstores. What I like about your writing is that you are so easy to understand. And you're funny too.

yours,
Tanya

Then Iris' plane landed. I stood at the window and watched her get off. She still looked good. She had come all the way from Canada to see me. She had one suitcase. I waved to her as she filed through the entranceway with the others. She had to pass through customs, then she was pressed up against me. We kissed and I got half a hard-on. She was in a dress, a practical tight-fitting blue dress, high heels and she wore a small hat cocked on her head. It was rare to see a woman in a dress. All the women in Los Angeles wore pants continually… .

Since we didn't have to wait for her baggage we drove right to my place. I parked out front and we walked through the court together. She sat on the couch while I poured her a drink. Iris looked over at my homemade bookcase.

"Did you write all those books?"

"Yes."

"I had no idea you had written so many."

"I wrote them."

"How many?"

"I don't know. Twenty, twenty-five… ."

I kissed her, putting one arm around her waist, pulling her to me. The other hand I put on her knee.

The phone rang. I got up and answered it. "Hank?" It was Valerie.

"Yes?"

"Who was that?"

"Who was who?"

"That girl… ."

"Oh, that's a friend from Canada."

"Hank, you and your goddamned women!"

"Yes."

"Bobby wants to know if you and …"

"Iris."

"He wants to know if you and Iris want to come down for a drink."

"Not tonight. I'll take a rain check."

"She's really got a body!"

"I know."

"All right, maybe tomorrow."

"Maybe… ."

I hung up thinking that Valerie probably liked women too. Well, that was all right. I poured two more drinks.

"How many women have you met at airports?" Iris asked. "It's not as bad as you think." "Have you lost count? Like your books?" "Math is one of my weaker points." "Do you enjoy meeting women at airports?" "Yes." I had not remembered that Iris was so talkative. "You pig!" She laughed. "Our first fight. Did you have a nice flight?" "I sat next to a bore. I made a mistake and let him buy me a drink. He talked my goddamned ear off."

"He was only excited. You're a sexy woman."

"Is that all you see in me?"

"I see lots of that. Maybe I'll see other things as we go along."

"Why do you want so many women?"

"It was my childhood, you see. No love, no affection. And in my twenties and thirties there also was very little. I'm playing catch-up. …"

"Will you know when you've caught up?"

"The feeling I have is that I'll need at least one more lifetime."

"You're so full of shit!"

I laughed. "That's why I write."

"I'm going to take a shower and change."

"Sure."

I went to the kitchen and felt-up the turkey. It showed me its legs, its pubic hair, its bunghole, its thighs; it sat there. I was glad it didn't have eyes. Well, we'd do something with the thing. That was the next step. I heard the toilet flush. If Iris didn't want to roast it, I'd roast it.

When I was young I was depressed all the time. But suicide no longer seemed a possibility in my life. At my age there was very little left to kill. It was good to be old, no matter what they said. It was reasonable that a man had to be at least 50 years old before he could write with anything like clarity. The more rivers you crossed, the more you knew about rivers—that is, if you survived the white water and the hidden rocks. It could be a rough cob, sometimes.

Iris came out. She had on a blueblack one piece dress that appeared to be silk and it clung. She wasn't your average American girl, which kept her from appearing obvious. She was a total woman but she didn't throw it in your face. American women drove hard bargains and they ended up looking the worse for it. The few natural American women left were mostly in Texas and Louisiana.

Iris smiled at me. She had something in each hand. She held both hands above her head and began making clicking noises. She began to dance. Or rather, she vibrated. It was as if she were shot through with electric current and the center of her soul was her belly. It was lovely and pure, with just the faintest hint of humor. The whole dance, as she never took her eyes off me, had its own meaning, a good endearing sense of its own worth.

Iris finished and I applauded, poured her a drink.

"I didn't do it justice," she said. "You need a costume and music."

"I liked it very much."

"I was going to bring a tape of the music but I knew you wouldn't have a machine."

"You're right. It was great anyhow."

I gave Iris a gentle kiss.

"Why don't you come live in Los Angeles?" I asked her.

"All my roots are up in the northwest. I like it there. My parents. My friends. Everything is up there, don't you see?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you move to Vancouver? You could write in Vancouver."

"I guess I could. I could write on top of an iceberg."

"You might try it."

"What?"

"Vancouver."

"What would your father think?"

"About what?"

"Us."

95

On Thanksgiving Iris prepared the turkey and put it in the oven. Bobby and Valerie came over for a few drinks but they didn't stay. It was refreshing. Iris had on another dress, just as appealing as the other.

"You know," she said, "I didn't bring enough clothes. Tomorrow Valerie and I are going shopping at Frederick's. I'm going to get some real slut-shoes. You'll like them."

"I'll like that, Iris."

I walked into the bathroom. I had hidden the photo Tanya had sent me in the medicine chest. She had her dress hiked up and she wasn't wearing panties. I could see her cunt. She was a cute bitch.

When I came out Iris was washing something in the sink. I grabbed her from behind, turned her around and kissed her. "You are a horny old dog!" she said. "I'll make you suffer tonight, my dear!" "Please do!"

We drank all through the afternoon, then got to the turkey around 5 or 6 pm. The food sobered us up. An hour later we began drinking again. We went to bed early, around 10 pm. I didn't have any problems. I was sober enough to insure a good long ride. The minute I began stroking I knew that I would make it. I didn't particularly try to please Iris. I just went ahead and gave her an old-fashioned horse fuck. The bed bounced and she grimaced. Then came low moans. I slowed down a bit, then picked up the pace and ripped it home. She appeared to climax along with me. Of course, a man never knew. I rolled off. I'd always liked Canadian bacon.

The next day Valerie came over and she and Iris left together for Frederick's. The mail arrived about an hour later. It contained another letter from Tanya:

Henry, dear …

I walked down the street today and these guys whistled. I walked on past them without response. The ones I really hate are the car wash guys. They holler things and stick out their tongues like they could really do something with their tongues, but there isn't really a man among them who could do it. You can tell, you know.

Yesterday I went into this clothing store to buy a pair of pants for Rex. Rex gave me the money. He can never buy his own things. He just hates to. So I went into this men's clothing store and picked out a pair of pants. There were two guys in there, middle-aged and one of the guys was real sarcastic. While I was picking out the pants he came up to me and he took my hand and put it on his cock. I told him, "Is that all you've got, poor thing!" He laughed and said something wise. I found these real nice pair of pants for Rex, green with thin white stripes. Rex likes green. Anyhow, this guy says to me, "Come on back into one of the try-on booths." Well, you know, sarcastic guys always fascinate me. So I went into the booth with him. The other guy saw us go in. We started kissing and he unzipped. He got a hard-on and put my hand on it. We kept kissing and he lifted my dress and looked at my panties in the mirror. He played with my ass. But his cock never got real hard, just half-hard, it just stayed half-hard. I told him he wasn't shit. He walked out of the booth with his cock out and zipped up in front of the other guy. They were laughing. I came out and paid for the pants. He bagged them. "Tell your husband you took his pants into the try-on booth!" he laughed. "You're nothing but a fucking fag!" I told him. "And your buddy is nothing but a fucking fag too!" And they were. Almost every man is a fag now. It's really difficult for a woman. I had a girlfriend who married a guy and she came home one day and found him in bed with another man. No wonder all the girls are having to buy vibrators these days. It's rough shit. Well, write me.

yours,
Tanya

Dear Tanya:

I got your letters and your photo. I am sitting here alone the day after Thanksgiving. I have a hangover. I liked your photo. Do you have any more?

Have you ever read Celine? Journey to the End of the Night, I mean. After that he lost stride and became a crank, bitching about his editors and his readers. It’s a real damn shame. His mind just went. I think he must have been a good doctor. Or maybe he wasn’t. Maybe his heart wasn’t in it. Maybe he killed his patients off. Now that would have made a good novel. Many doctors do that. They give you a pill and send you back out on the street again. They need money to pay for what their educations cost them. So they pack their waiting rooms and run the patients in and out. They weigh you, take your blood pressure, give you a pill and send you back out on the street feeling worse. A dental surgeon may take your life savings but usually he does something for your teeth.

Anyhow, I’m still writing and I seem to be making the rent. I find your letters interesting. Who took that photo of you without your panties on? A good friend, no doubt. Rex? You see, I’m getting jealous! That’s a good sign, isn’t it? Let’s just call it interest. Or concern.

I’ll watch the mailbox. Any more photos?

yours, yes, yes,

Henry

The door opened and it was Iris. I pulled the sheet out of the typewriter and laid it face down.

“Oh, Hank! I got the slut-shoes!”

“Great! Great!”

“I’ll put them on for you! I’m sure you’ll love them!”

“Baby, do it!”

Iris walked into the bedroom. I took the letter to Tanya and stuck it under a pile of papers.

Iris walked out. The shoes were bright red on viciously high heels. She looked like one of the greatest whores of all time. There were no backs on the shoes and her feet showed through the see-through material. Iris walked back and forth. She had a most provocative body and ass anyhow, and walking on those heels pushed it all sky-high. It was maddening. Iris stopped and looked back at me over her shoulder, smiled. What a marvelous chippy! She had more hip, more ass, more calf than I'd ever seen before. I ran out and poured two drinks. Iris sat down and crossed her legs high. She sat in a chair across the room from me. The miracles in my life kept occurring. I couldn't understand it.

My cock was hard, throbbing, pushing against my pants.

"You know what a man likes," I told Iris.

We finished our drinks. I took her by the hand into the bedroom. I pushed her on the bed. I pulled her dress back and got at her panties. It was hard work. Her panties got caught on one shoe, got hooked on the heel, but I finally got them off. Iris's dress was still covering her hips. I raised her ass and pushed the dress up under her. She was already wet. I felt her with my fingers. Iris was almost always wet, almost always ready. She was a total joy. She had long nylon stockings with blue garters decorated with red roses. I put it into the wetness. Her legs were raised high in the air and as I caressed her I saw those slut-shoes on her feet, red heels jutting like stilettoes. Iris was in for another old-fashioned horse fuck. Love was for guitar players, Catholics and chess freaks. That bitch with her red shoes and long stockings—she deserved what she was going to get from me. I tried to rip her apart, I tried to split her in half. I watched that strange half-Indian face in the soft sunlight that filtered weakly through the blinds. It was like murder. I had her. There was no escape. I ripped and roared, slapped her across the face and nearly tore her in half.

I was surprised that she was able to get up smiling and walk to the bathroom. She looked almost happy. Her shoes had come off and were lying by the side of the bed. My cock was still hard. I picked up one of the shoes and rubbed my cock with it. It felt great. Then I put the shoe back on the floor. When Iris came out of the bathroom still smiling, my cock went down.

96

Not much happened during the rest of her stay. We drank, we ate, we fucked. There were no arguments. We took long drives down along the shore, ate at seafood cafes. I didn't bother with writing. There were times when it was best to get away from the machine. A good writer knew when not to write. Anybody could type. Not that I was a good typist; also I couldn't spell and I didn't know grammar. But I knew when not to write. It was like fucking. You had to rest the godhead now and then. I had an old friend who occasionally wrote me letters, Jimmy Shannon. He wrote 6 novels a year, all on incest. It was no wonder he was starving. My problem was that I couldn't rest my cock-godhead like I could my typer-godhead. That was because women were available only in streaks so you had to get as much in as possible before somebody else's godhead came along. I think the fact that I quit writing for ten years was one of the luckiest things that ever happened to me. (I suppose that some critics would say that it was one of the luckiest things that ever happened to the reader, too.) Ten year's rest for both sides. What would happen if I stopped drinking for ten years?

The time came to put Iris Duarte back on the plane. It was a morning flight which made it difficult. I was used to rising at noon; it was a fine cure for hangovers and would add 5 years to my life. I felt no sadness while driving her to L.A. International. The sex had been fine; there had been laughter. I could hardly remember a more civilized time, neither of us making any demands, yet there had been warmth, it had not been without feeling, dead meat coupled with dead meat. I detested that type of swinging, the Los Angeles, Hollywood, Bel Air, Malibu, Laguna Beach kind of sex. Strangers when you meet, strangers when you part—a gymnasium of bodies namelessly masturbating each other. People with no morals often considered themselves more free, but mostly they lacked the ability to feel or to love. So they became swingers. The dead fucking the dead. There was no gamble or humor in their game —it was corpse fucking corpse. Morals were restrictive, but they were grounded on human experience down through the centuries. Some morals tended to keep people slaves in factories, in churches and true to the State. Other morals simply made good sense. It was like a garden filled with poisoned fruit and good fruit. You had to know which to pick and eat, which to leave alone.

My experience with Iris had been delightful and fulfilling, yet I wasn't in love with her nor she with me. It was easy to care and hard not to care. I cared. We sat in the Volks on the upper parking ramp. We had some time. I had the radio on. Brahms.

"Will I see you again?" I asked her.

"I don't think so."

"Do you want a drink in the bar?"

"You've made an alcoholic out of me, Hank. I'm so weak I can hardly walk."

"Was it just the booze?"

"No."

"Then let's get a drink."

"Drink, drink, drink! Is that all you can think of?"

"No, but it's a good way to get through spaces, like this one."

"Can't you face things straight?"

"I can but I'd rather not."

"That's escapism."

"Everything is: playing golf, sleeping, eating, walking, arguing, jogging, breathing, fucking. …"

"Fucking?"

"Look, we're talking like high school children. Let's get you on the plane."

It wasn't going well. I wanted to kiss her but I sensed her reserve. A wall. Iris wasn't feeling good, I guess, and I wasn't feeling good.

"All right," she said, "we'll check in and then go get a drink. Then I'll fly away forever: real smooth, real easy, no pain."

“All right!” I said.

And that was just the way it was.

The way back: Century Boulevard east, down to Crenshaw, up 8th Avenue, then Arlington to Wilton. I decided to pick up my laundry and turned right on Beverly Boulevard I drove into the lot behind the Silverette Cleaners and parked the Volks. As I did a young black girl in a red dress walked past. She had a marvelous swing to her ass, a most marvelous motion. Then the building blocked my view. She had the movements; it was as if life had given a few women a supple grace and denied the rest. She had that indescribable grace.

I stepped out onto the sidewalk and watched her from behind. I saw her turn and look back. Then she stood and stared at me, looking back over her shoulder. I walked into the laundry. When I came out with my things she was standing by my Volks. I put the things inside from the passenger’s side. Then I moved around to the driver’s side. She stood in front of me. She was about 27 with a very round face, impassive. We were standing very close together.

“I saw you looking at me. Why were you looking at me?”

“I apologize. I didn’t mean any offense.”

“I want to know why you were looking at me. You were really staring at me.”

“Look, you’re a beautiful woman. You have a beautiful body. I saw you walk by and I looked. I couldn’t help it.”

“Do you want a date for tonight?”

“Well, that would be great. But I’ve got a date. I’ve got something going.”

I circled around her and made for the driver’s side. I opened the door and got in. She walked off. As she did I heard her whisper, “Dumb honky asshole.”

I opened the mail—nothing. I needed to regroup. Something needed was missing. I looked in the refrigerator. Nothing. I walked outside, got in the Volks and drove to the Blue Elephant liquor store. I got a fifth of Smirnoff and some 7-UP. As I drove back toward my place, somewhere along the way, I knew I had forgotten cigarettes.

I went south down Western Avenue, took a left on Hollywood Boulevard, then a right on Serrano. I was trying to get to a Sav-On—for smokes. Right on the corner of Serrano and Sunset stood another black girl, a high-yellow in black high heels and a mini-skirt. As she stood there in that short skirt I could see just a touch of blue panty. She began to walk and I drove along beside her. She pretended not to notice me.

"Hey, baby!"

She stopped. I pulled over to the curb. She walked up to the car.

"How you doing?" I asked her.

"All right."

"Are you a decoy?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," I asked her, "how do I know you're not a cop?"

"How do I know you're not a cop?"

"Look at my face. Do I look like a cop?"

"All right," she said, "drive around the corner and park. I'll get in around the corner."

I drove around the corner in front of Mr. Famous N.J. Sandwiches. She opened the door and got in.

"What do you want?" she asked. She was in her mid-thirties and one large solid gold tooth stood out in the center of her smile. She'd never be broke.

"Head," I said.

"Twenty dollars."

"O.K., let's go."

"Drive up Western to Franklin, take a left, go to Harvard and take a right."

When we got to Harvard it was hard to park. Finally I parked in a red zone and we got out.

"Follow me," she said.

It was a decaying high-rise. Just before we reached the lobby she took a right and I followed her up a cement stairway, watching her ass. It was strange, but everybody had an ass. It was almost sad. But I didn't want her ass. I followed her down a hallway and then up some more cement steps. We were using some kind of fire escape instead of the elevator. What her reason was I had no idea. But I needed the exercise—if I intended to write big fat novels in my old age like Knut Hamsun.

We finally reached her apartment and she got out her key. I grabbed her hand.

"Wait a minute," I said.

"What is it?"

"You got a couple of big black bastards in there who are gonna kick my ass and roll me?"

"No, there's nobody in there. I live with a girl friend and she's not home. She works at the Broadway Department Store."

"Give me the key."

I opened the door slowly and then kicked it wide with my foot. I looked inside. I had my steel but I didn't reach. She closed the door behind us.

"Come on in the bedroom," she said.

"Wait a minute. …"

I ripped open a closet door and reaching in felt behind the clothing. Nothing.

"What kind of shit are you on, man?"

"I'm not on any kind of shit!"

"Oh Lord …"

I ran into the bathroom and yanked back the shower curtain. Nothing. I went into the kitchen, pulled back the plastic curtain below the sink. Just a filthy overflowing plastic trash basket. I checked the other bedroom, the closet in there. I looked under the double bed: an empty bottle of Ripple. I walked out.

"Come on back here," she said.

It was a tiny bedroom, more like an alcove. There was a cot with dirty sheets. The blanket was on the floor. I unzipped and pulled it out.

“$20,” she said.

“Get your lips on this motherfucker! Suck it dry!”

$20.

"I know the price. Earn it. Drain my balls."

"$20 first. …"

"Oh yeah? I give you the twenty, how do I know you don't yell for the cops? How do I know your 7-foot basketball-ass brother don't arrive with his switchblade?"

"$20 first. And don't worry. I'll suck you. I'll suck you good."

"I don't trust you, whore."

I zipped up and got out of there, fast, I went down all those cement steps. I reached the bottom, jumped into the Volks and drove back to my place.

I started drinking. My stars simply weren't in order.

The phone rang. It was Bobby. "Did you get Iris on the plane?"

"Yeah, Bobby, and I want to thank you for keeping your hands off for a change."

"Look, Hank, that's just in your head. You're old and you bring all these young chicks over, then you get nervous when a young cat comes around. Your ass gets uptight."

"Self-doubt … lack of confidence, right?"

"Well …"

"O.K., Bobby.:'

"Anyhow, Valerie wondered if you wanted to come down for a drink?"

"Why not?"

Bobby had some bad shit, real bad shit. We passed it around. Bobby had a lot of new tapes for the stereo. He also had my favorite singer, Randy Newman, and he put Randy on, but only medium-loud, as per my request.

So we listened to Randy and smoked and then Valerie began putting on a fashion show. She had a dozen sexy outfits from Frederick's. She had 30 pairs of shoes hanging on the back of the bathroom door.

Valerie came prancing out in 8-inch high heels. She could hardly walk. She poked about the room, staggering on her stilts. Her ass poked out and her tiny nipples were hard and stiff, they jutted out under her see-through blouse. She had on a thin gold anklet. She whirled and faced us, made some gentle sexual movements.

"Christ," said Bobby, "Oh … Christ!"

"Holy Jesus Christ Mother of God!" I said.

As Valerie went past I reached out and got a handful of ass. I was living. I felt great. Valerie ducked into the crapper for a change of costume.

Each time Valerie came out she looked better, crazier, wilder. The whole process was moving toward some climax.

We drank and smoked and Valerie kept coming back with more. One hell of a show.

She sat on my lap and Bobby snapped some photos.

The night wore on. Then I looked around and Valerie and Bobby were gone. I walked into the bedroom and there was Valerie on the bed, naked except for her spiked high heels. Her body was firm and lean.

Bobby was still dressed and was sucking Valerie's breasts, going from one to the other. Her nipples stood tall.

Bobby looked up at me. "Hey, old man, I've heard you brag about how you eat pussy. How's this?"

Bobby ducked down and spread Valerie's legs. Her cunt hairs were long and twisted and tangled. Bobby went down there and licked at the clit. He was pretty good but he lacked spirit.

"Wait a minute, Bobby, you're not doing it right. Let me show you."

I got down there. I began far back and worked toward it. Then I got there. Valerie responded. Too much so. She wrapped her legs around my head and I couldn't breathe. My ears were pressed flat. I pulled my head out of there.

"O.K., Bobby, you see?"

Bobby didn't answer. He turned and walked into the bathroom. I had my shoes and pants off. I liked to show off my legs when I drank. Valerie reached up and pulled me down on the bed. Then she bent over my cock and took it into her mouth. She wasn't very good compared to most. She began the old head-bob and had very little else to offer beside that. She worked a long time and I felt I wasn't going to make it. I pulled her head away, put it up on the pillow and kissed her. Then I mounted. I had made about 8 or 10 strokes when I heard Bobby behind us.

"I want you to leave, man."

"Bobby, what the hell's wrong?"

"I want you to go back to your place."

I pulled out, got up, walked into the front room and put on my pants and shoes.

"Hey, Cool Papa," I said to Bobby, "what's wrong?"

"I just want you out of here."

"All right, all right. …"

I walked back to my place. It seemed a very long time since I had put Iris Duarte on that plane. She must be back in Vancouver by now. Shit. Iris Duarte, goodnight.

97

I got a letter in the mail. It was addressed from Hollywood.

Dear Chinaski:

I've just read almost all your books. I work as a typist in a place on Cherokee Ave. I've hung your picture in the place where I work. It's a poster from one of your readings. People ask me, "Who's that?" and I say, "That's my boy friend" and they say. "My God!"

I gave my boss your book of stories, The Beast with Three Legs and he said he didn't like it. He said you didn't know how to write. He said it was cheap shit. He got quite angry about it.

Anyhow, I like your things and I'd like to meet you. They say I'm pretty well stacked. Care to check me out?

luv,

Valencia

She left two phone numbers, one at work, one at home. It was about 2:30 pm. I dialed the work number. "Yes? a female answered.

"Is Valencia there?"

"This is Valencia."

"This is Chinaski. I got your letter."

"I thought you'd phone."

"You have a sexy voice," I said.

"You have too," she answered.

"When can I see you?" I asked.

"Well, I'm not doing anything tonight."

"O.K. How about tonight?"

"All right," she said, "I'll see you after work. You can meet me at this bar on Cahuenga Boulevard, The Foxhole. You know where it is?"

"Yes."

"I'll see you around six then… ."

I drove up and parked outside The Foxhole. I lit a cigarette and sat there awhile. Then I got out and walked into the bar. Which one was Valencia? I stood there and nobody said anything. I walked up to the bar and ordered a double vodka-7. Then I heard my name, "Henry?"

I looked around and there was a blonde alone in a booth. I took my drink over and sat down. She was about 38, and not stacked. She had gone to seed, was a bit too fat. Her breasts were very large but they sagged wearily. She had short clipped blond hair. She was heavily made up and she looked tired. She was in pants, blouse and boots. Pale blue eyes. Many bracelets on each arm. Her face revealed nothing, although once she might have been beautiful.

"It was really a fucking miserable day," she said. "I typed my ass off."

"Let's make it some other night then when you're feeling better," I said.

"Ah, shit, it's all right. Another drink and I'll spring back."

Valencia motioned to the waitress. "Another wine."

She was drinking a white wine.

"How's the writing going?" she asked. "Any new books out?"

"No, but I'm working on a novel."

"What's it called?"

"No title yet."

"Is it going to be a good one?"

"I don't know."

Neither of us said anything for a while. I finished my vodka and had another. Valencia just wasn't my type in any sense of the word. I disliked her. There are people like that—immediately upon meeting them you despise them.

"There's a Japanese girl down where I work. She does everything possible to get me fired. I'm in tight with the boss, but this bitch makes the day unpleasant for me. Someday I'm going to stick my foot up her ass."

"Where are you from?"

"Chicago."

"I didn't like Chicago," I said.

"I like Chicago."

I finished my drink, she finished hers. Valencia pushed her bill toward me. "You mind paying for this? I had a shrimp salad too."

I took out my key to unlock the door.

"This your car?"

"Yes."

"You expect me to ride in an old car like that?"

"Look, if you don't want to get in, don't get in."

Valencia got in. She took out her mirror and began making up her face as we drove along. It wasn't far to my place. I parked.

Inside she said, "This place is filthy. You need somebody to fix it up."

I got out the vodka and the 7-UP and poured two drinks. Valencia pulled her boots off.

"Where's your typewriter?"

"On the kitchen table."

"You don't have a desk? I thought writers had desks."

"Some don't even have kitchen tables."

"You been married?" Valencia asked.

"Once."

"What went wrong?"

"We began to hate each other."

"I've been married four times. I still see my ex-husbands. We're friends."

"Drink up."

"You seem nervous," said Valencia.

"I'm all right."

Valencia finished her drink, then stretched out on the couch. She put her head in my lap. I began to stroke her hair. I poured her another drink, and went back to stroking her hair. I could look into her blouse and see her breasts. I leaned over and gave her a long kiss. Her tongue darted in and out of my mouth. I hated her. My cock began to rise. We kissed again and I reached down into her blouse.

"I knew I'd meet you some day," she said.

I kissed her again, this time with some savagery. She felt my cock against her head.

"Hey!" she said.

"It's nothing," I said.

"Like hell," she said. "What do you want to do?"

"I don't know. …"

"I know."

Valencia got up and went to the bathroom. When she came out she was naked. She got under the bedsheet. I had another drink. Then I undressed and got into bed. I pulled the sheet back. What huge breasts. She was one-half breast. I firmed one up with my hand as best I could and sucked at the nipple. It didn't harden. I went to the other breast and sucked at the nipple. No response. I sloshed her breasts about. I stuck my cock in between them. The nipples remained soft. I shoved my cock at her mouth and she turned her head away. I thought of burning her ass with a cigarette. What a mass of flesh she was. A worn out busted down streetwalker. Whores usually made me hot. My cock was hard but my spirit wasn't in it.

"Are you Jewish?" I asked her.

"No."

"You look Jewish."

"I'm not."

"You live in the Fairfax district, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Are your parents Jewish?"

"Listen, what's all this Jewish shit?"

"Don't feel bad. Some of my best friends are Jewish."

I sloshed her breasts around again.

"You seem frightened," Valencia said. "You seem uptight."

I waved my cock in her face.

"Does that look frightened?"

"It looks horrible. Where'd you get all those big veins?"

"I like them."

I grabbed her by the hair and pressed her head up against the wall and sucked at her teeth while looking into her eyes. Then I began playing with her cunt. She was a long time coming around. Then she began to open and I stuck my finger in. I got to the clit and worked it. Then I mounted. My cock was inside of her. We were actually fucking. I had no desire to please her. Valencia had a fair grip. I was into her pretty good but she didn't seem to be responding. I didn't care. I pumped and pumped. One more fuck. Research. There was no sense of violation involved. Poverty and ignorance bred their own truth. She was mine. We were two animals in the forest and I was murdering her. She was coming around. I kissed her and her lips were finally open. I dug it in. The blue walls watched us. Valencia began making little sounds. That spurred me on.

When she came out of the bathroom I was dressed. There were two drinks on the table. We sipped our drinks.

"How come you live in the Fairfax district?" I asked.

"I like it there."

"Should I drive you home?"

"If you don't mind."

She lived two blocks east of Fairfax. "That's my place there," she said, "with the screen door."

"Looks like a nice place."

"It is. Want to come in for a while?"

"Got anything to drink?"

"Can you drink sherry?"

"Sure …"

We went in. There were towels on the floor. She kicked them under the couch as she walked past. Then she came out with the sherry. It was very cheap stuff.

"Where's your bathroom?" I asked.

I flushed the toilet to cover the sound, then puked the sherry back up. I flushed again and came out.

"Another drink?" she asked.

"Sure."

"The kids came by," she said, "that's why the place is such a mess."

"You've got kids?"

"Yes but Sam is taking care of them."

I finished my drink. "Well, look, thanks for the drinks. I've got to get going."

"All right, you've got my phone number."

"Right."

Valencia walked me to the screen door. We kissed there. Then I walked out to the Volks. I got in and drove off. I circled around the corner, double-parked, opened the door and puked up the other drink.

98

I saw Sara every three or four days, at her place or at mine. We slept together but there was no sex. We came close but we never quite got to it. Drayer Baba's precepts held strong.

We decided to spend the holidays together at my place, Christmas and New Year's.

Sara arrived about noon on the 24th in her Volks van. I watched her park, then went out to meet her. She had lumber tied to the roof of the van. It was to be my Christmas present: she was going to build me a bed. My bed was a mockery: a simple box spring with the innards sticking out of the mattress. Sara had also brought an organic turkey plus the trimmings. I was to pay for that and the white wine. And there were some small gifts for each of us.

We carried in the lumber and the turkey and the sundry bits and pieces. I placed the box spring, mattress and headboard outside and put a sign on them: "Free." The headboard went first, the box spring second, and finally somebody took the mattress. It was a poor neighborhood.

I had seen Sara's bed at her place, slept in it, and had liked it. I had always disliked the average mattress, at least the ones I was able to buy. I had spent over half my life in beds which were better suited for somebody shaped like an angleworm.

Sara had built her own bed, and she was to build me another like it. A solid wood platform supported by 7 four-by-four legs (the seventh directly in the middle) topped by a layer of firm 4-inch foam. Sara had some good ideas. I held the boards and Sara drove home the nails. She was good with a hammer. She only weighed 105 pounds but she could drive a nail. It was going to be a fine bed.

It didn't take Sara long.

Then we tested it—non-sexually—as Drayer Baba smiled over us.

We drove around looking for a Christmas tree. I wasn't too anxious to get a tree (Christmas had always been an unhappy time in my childhood) and when we found all the lots empty, the lack of a tree didn't bother me. Sara was unhappy as we drove back. But after we got in and had a few glasses of white wine she regained her spirits and went about hanging Christmas ornaments, lights, and tinsel everywhere, some of the tinsel in my hair.

I had read that more people committed suicide on Christmas Eve and on Christmas Day than at any other time. The holiday had little or nothing to do with the Birth of Christ, apparently.

All the radio music was sickening and the t.v. was worse, so we turned it off and she phoned her mother in Maine. I spoke to Mama too and Mama was not all that bad.

"At first," said Sara, "I was thinking about fixing you up with Mama but she's older than you are."

"Forget it."

"She had nice legs."

"Forget it."

"Are you prejudiced against old age?"

"Yes, everybody's old age but mine."

"You act like a movie star. Have you always had women 20 or 30 years younger than you?"

"Not when I was in my twenties."

"All right then. Have you ever had a woman older than you, I mean lived with her?"

"Yeah, when I was 25 I lived with a woman 35."

"How'd it go?"

"It was terrible. I fell in love."

"What was terrible?"

"She made me go to college."

"And that's terrible?"

"It wasn't the kind of college you're thinking of. She was the faculty, and I was the student body."

"What happened to her?"

"I buried her."

"With honors? Did you kill her?"

"Booze killed her."

"Merry Christmas."

"Sure. Tell me about yours."

"I pass."

"Too many?"

"Too many, yet too few."

Thirty or 40 minutes later there was a knock on the door. Sara got up and opened it. A sex symbol walked in. On Christmas Eve. I didn't know who she was. She was in a tight black outfit and her huge breasts looked as if they would burst out of the top of her dress. It was magnificent. I had never seen breasts like that, showcased in just that way, except in the movies.

"Hi, Hank!"

She knew me.

"I'm Edie. You met me at Bobby's one night."

"Oh?"

"Were you too drunk to remember?"

"Hello, Edie. This is Sara."

"I was looking for Bobby. I thought Bobby might be down here."

"Sit down and have a drink."

Edie sat in a chair to my right, very near to me. She was about 25. She lit a cigarette and sipped at her drink. Each time she leaned forward over the coffee table I was sure that it would happen, I was sure that those breasts would spring out. And I was afraid of what I might do if they did. I just didn't know. I had never been a breast man, I had always been a leg man. But Edie really knew how to do it. I was afraid and I peeked sideways at her breasts not knowing whether I wanted them to fall out or to stay in.

"You met Manny," she said to me, "down at Bobby's?"

"Yeh."

"I had to kick his ass out. He was too fucking jealous. He even hired a private dick to follow me! Imagine that! That simple sack of shit!"

"Yeh."

"I hate men who are beggars! I hate little toadies!"

"'A good man nowadays is hard to find,'" I said. "That's a song. Out of World War Two. They also had, 'Don't sit under the apple tree with anybody else but me.'"

"Hank, you're babbling… ." said Sara.

"Have another drink, Edie," I said and I poured her one.

"Men are such shits!" she continued. "I walked into a bar the other day. I was with four guys, close friends. We sat around chugalugging pitchers of beer, we're laughing, you know, just having a good time, we weren't bothering anybody. Then I got the idea that I would like to shoot a game of pool. I like to shoot pool. I think that when a lady shoots pool it shows her class."

"I can't shoot pool," I said. "I always rip up the green. And I'm not even a lady."

"Anyway, I go up to the table and there's this guy shooting pool all by himself. I go up to him and I say, 'Look, you've had this table a long time. My friends and myself want to shoot a little pool. Do you mind letting us have the table for a while?' He turned and looked at me. He waited. Then he sneered, and he said, 'All right.'"

Edie became animated and bounced around as she spoke and I peeked at her things.

"I went back and told my friends, 'We got the table.' Finally this guy shooting is down to his last ball when a buddy of his walks up and says, 'Hey, Ernie, I hear you're giving up the table.' And you know what he tells this guy? He says, 'Yeah, I'm giving it up to that bitch!' I heard it and I saw RED! This guy is bent over the table to cue in on his last ball. I grabbed a pool stick and while he was bent over I hit him over the head as hard as I could. The guy dropped on the table like he was dead. He was known in the bar and so a bunch of his friends rush over but meanwhile my four buddies rush over too. Boy, what a brawl! Bottles smashing, broken mirrors. … I don't know how we got out of there but we did. You got some shit?"

"Yeah but I don't roll too good."

"I'll take care of it."

Edie rolled a tight thin joint, just like a pro. She sucked it up, hissing, then passed it to me.

"So I went back the next night, alone. The owner who is the bartender, he recognizes me. His name is Claude. 'Claude,' I told him, 'I'm sorry about yesterday but that guy at the table was a real bastard. He called me a bitch.'"

I poured more drinks all around. In another minute her breasts would be out.

"The owner said, 'It's O.K., forget it.' He seemed like a nice guy. 'What do you drink?' he asked me. I hung around the bar and had two or three free drinks and he said, 'You know, I can use another waitress.'"

Edie took a hit on the joint and continued. "He told me about the other waitress. 'She pulled the men in but she made a lot of trouble. She played one guy against the other. She was always on stage. Then I found out she was tricking on the side. She was using MY place to peddle her pussy!'"

"Really?" Sara asked.

"That's what he said. Anyhow, he offered me a position as a waitress. And he said, 'No tricking on the job!' I told him to cut the shit, I wasn't one of those. I thought maybe now I'll be able to save some money and go to U.C.L. A., to become a chemist and to study French, that's what I've always wanted to do. Then he said, 'Come on back here, I want to show you where we store our excess stock and also I've got an outfit I'd like you to try on. It's never been worn and I think it's your size.' So I went into this dark little room with him and he tried to grab me. I pushed him off. Then he said, 'Just give me a little kiss.' 'Fuck off!' I told him. He was bald and fat and very short and had false teeth and black warts with hairs growing out of them on his cheeks. He rushed me and grabbed a hunk of my ass with one hand and some titty with the other and he tried to kiss me. I pushed him off again. 'I got a wife,' he said, 'I love my wife, don't worry!' He rushed me again and I gave him a knee you-know-where. I guess he didn't have anything there, he didn't even flinch. 'I'll give you money,' he said, 'I'll be nice to you!' I told him to eat shit and die. And so I lost another job."

"That is a sad story," I said.

"Listen," said Edie, "I gotta go. Merry Christmas. Thanks for the drinks."

She got up and I walked her to the door, opened it. She walked off through the court. I came back and sat down.

"You son-of-a-bitch," said Sara.

"What is it?"

"If I hadn't been here you would have fucked her."

"I hardly know the lady."

"All that tit! You were terrified! You were afraid to even look at her!"

"What's she doing wandering around on Christmas Eve?"

"Why didn't you ask her?"

"She said she was looking for Bobby."

"If I hadn't been here you would have fucked her."

"I don't know. I have no way of knowing… ."

Then Sara stood up and screamed. She began to sob and then she ran into the other room. I poured a drink. The colored lights on the walls blinked off and on.

99

Sara was preparing the turkey dressing and I sat in the kitchen talking to her. We were both sipping white wine.

The phone rang. I went and got it. It was Debra. "I just wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas, wet noodle."

"Thank you, Debra. And a happy Santa Claus to you."

We talked awhile, then I went back and sat down.

"Who was that?"

"Debra."

"How is she?"

"All right, I guess."

"What did she want?"

"She sent Christmas greetings."

"You'll like this organic turkey, and the stuffing is good too. People eat poison, pure poison. America is one of the few countries where cancer of the colon is prevalent."

"Yeah, my ass itches a lot, but it's just my hemorrhoids. I had them cut out once. Before they operate they run this snake up your intestine with a little light attached and they peek into you looking for cancer. That snake is pretty long. They just run it up you!"

The phone rang again. I went and got it. It was Cassie. "How are you doing?"

"Sara and I are preparing a turkey."

"I miss you."

"Merry Christmas to you too. How's the job going?"

"All right. I'm off until January 2nd."

"Happy New Year, Cassie!"

"What the hell's the matter with you?"

"I'm a little airy. I'm not used to white wine so early in the day."

"Give me a call some time."

"Sure."

I walked back into the kitchen. “It was Cassie. People phone on Christmas. Maybe Drayer Baba will call.”

“He won’t.”

“Why?”

“He never spoke aloud. He never spoke and he never touched money.”

“That’s pretty good. Let me eat some of that raw dressing.”

“O.K.”

“Say—not bad!”

Then the phone rang again. It worked like that. Once it started ringing it kept ringing. I walked into the bedroom and answered it.

“Hello,” I said. “Who’s this?”

“You son-of-a-bitch. Don’t you know?”

“No, not really.” It was a drunken female.

“Guess.”

“Wait. I know! It’s Iris!”

“Yes, Iris. And I’m pregnant!”

“Do you know who the father is?”

“What difference does it make?”

“I guess you’re right. How are things in Vancouver?”

“All right. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

I walked back into the kitchen again.

“It was the Canadian belly dancer,” I told Sara.

“How’s she doing?”

“She’s just full of Christmas cheer.”

Sara put the turkey in the oven and we went into the front room. We talked small talk for some time. Then the phone rang again. “Hello,” I said.

“Are you Henry Chinaski?” It was a young male voice.

“Yes.”

“Are you Henry Chinaski, the writer?”

“Yeah.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

"Well, we're a gang of guys from Bel Air and we really dig your stuff, man! We dig it so much that we're going to reward you, man!

"Oh?"

"Yeah, we're coming over with some 6-packs of beer."

"Stick that beer up your ass."

"What?"

"I said, 'Stick it up your ass!'"

I hung up.

"Who was that?" asked Sara.

"I just lost 3 or 4 readers from Bel Air. But it was worth it."

The turkey was done and I pulled it out of the oven, put it on a platter, moved the typer and all my papers off the kitchen table, and placed the turkey there. I began carving as Sara came in with the vegetables. We sat down. I filled my plate, Sara filled hers. It looked good.

"I hope that one with the tits doesn't come by again," said Sara. She looked very upset at the thought.

"If she does I'll give her a piece."

"What?"

I pointed to the turkey. "I said, 'I'll give her a piece.' You can watch."

Sara screamed. She stood up. She was trembling. Then she ran into the bedroom. I looked at my turkey. I couldn't eat it. I had pushed the wrong button again. I walked into the front room with my drink and sat down. I waited 15 minutes and then I put the turkey and the vegetables in the refrigerator.

Sara went back to her place the next day and I had a cold turkey sandwich about 3 pm. About 5 pm there was a terrific pounding on the door. I opened it up. It was Tammie and Arlene. They were cruising on speed. They walked in and jumped around, both of them talking at once.

"Got anything to drink?"

"Shit, Hank, ya got anything to drink?"

"How was your fucking Christmas?"

"Yeah. How was your fucking Christmas, man?"

“There’s some beer and wine in the icebox,” I told them.

(You can always tell an old-timer: he calls a refrigerator an icebox.) They danced into the kitchen and opened the icebox.

“Hey, here’s a turkey!”

“We’re hungry, Hank! Can we have some turkey?”

“Sure.”

Tammie came out with a leg and bit into it. “Hey, this is an awful turkey! It needs spices!”

Arlene came out with slices of meat in her hands. “Yeah, this needs spices. It’s too mellow! You got any spices?”

“In the cupboard,” I said.

They jumped back into the kitchen and began sprinkling on the spices.

“There! That’s better!”

“Yeah, it tastes like something now!”

“Organic turkey, shit!”

“Yeah, it’s shit!”

“I want some more!”

“Me too. But it needs spices.”

Tammie came out and sat down. She had just about finished the leg. Then she took the leg bone, bit and broke it in half, and started chewing the bone. I was astonished. She was eating the leg bone, spitting splinters out on the rug.

“Hey, you’re eating the bone!”

“Yeah, it’s good!”

Tammie ran back into the kitchen for some more.

Soon they both came out, each of them with a bottle of beer.

“Thanks, Hank.”

“Yeah, thanks, man.”

They sat there sucking at the beers.

“Well,” said Tammie, “we gotta get going.”

“Yeah, we’re going out to rape some junior high school boys!”

“Yeah!”

The both jumped up and they were gone out the door. I walked into the kitchen and looked into the refrig. That turkey looked like it had been mauled by a tiger—the carcass had simply been ripped apart. It looked obscene.

Sara drove over the next evening.

“How’s the turkey?” she asked.

“O.K.”

She walked in and opened the refrigerator door. She screamed. Then she ran out.

“My god, what happened?”

“Tammie and Arlene came by. I don’t think they had eaten for a week.”

“Oh, it’s sickening. It hurts my heart!”

“I’m sorry. I should have stopped them. They were on uppers.”

“Well, there’s just one thing I can do.”

“What’s that?”

“I can make you a nice turkey soup. I’ll go get some vegetables.”

“All right.” I gave her a twenty.

Sara prepared the soup that night. It was delicious. When she left in the morning she gave me instructions on how to heat it up.

Tammie knocked on the door around 4 pm. I let her in and she walked straight to the kitchen. The refrigerator door opened. “Hey, soup, huh?” “Yeah.”

“Is it any good?” “Yeah.”

“Mind if I try some?” “O.K.”

I heard her put it on the stove. Then I heard her dipping in there.

“God! This stuff is mild! It needs spices!”

I heard her spooning the spices in. Then she tried it.

“That’s better! But it needs more! I’m Italian, you know. Now … there … that’s better! Now I’ll let it heat up. Can I have a beer?”

“All right.”

She came in with her bottle and sat down.

“Do you miss me?” she asked.

“You’ll never know.”

"I think I'm going to get my job back at the Play Pen."

"Great."

"Some good tippers come in that place. One guy he tipped me 5 bucks each night. He was in love with me. But he never asked me out. He just ogled me. He was strange. He was a rectal surgeon and sometimes he masturbated as he watched me walking around. I could smell the stuff on him, you know."

"Well, you got him off… ."

"I think the soup is ready. Want some?"

"No thanks."

Tammie went in and I heard her spooning it out of the pot. She was in there a long time. Then she came out.

"Could you lend me a five until Friday?"

"No."

"Then lend me a couple of bucks."

"No."

"Just give me a dollar then."

I gave Tammie a pocketful of change. It came to a dollar and thirty-seven cents.

"Thanks," she said.

"It's all right."

Then she was gone out of the door.

Sara came by the next evening. She seldom came by this often, it was something about the holiday season, everybody was lost, half-crazy, afraid. I had the white wine ready and poured us both a drink.

"How's the Inn going?" I asked her.

"Business is crappy. It hardly pays to stay open."

"Where are your customers?"

"They've all left town; they've all gone somewhere."

"All our schemes have holes in them."

"Not all of them. Some people just keep making it and making it."

"True."

"How's the soup?"

"Just about finished."

“Did you like it?”

“I didn’t have too much.”

Sara walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door.

“What happened to the soup? It looks strange.”

I heard her tasting it. Then she ran to the sink and spit it out.

“Jesus, it’s been poisoned! What happened? Did Tammie and Arlene come back and eat soup too?”

“Just Tammie.”

Sara didn’t scream. She just poured the remainder of the soup into the sink and ran the garbage disposal. I could hear her sobbing, trying not to make any sound. That poor organic turkey had had a rough Christmas.

100

New Year's Eve was another bad night for me to get through. My parents had always delighted in New Year's Eve, listening to it approach on the radio, city by city, until it arrived in Los Angeles. The firecrackers went off and the whistles and horns blew and the amateur drunks vomited and husbands flirted with other men's wives and the wives flirted with who ever they could. Everybody kissed and played grab-ass in the bathrooms and closets and sometimes openly, especially at midnight, and there were terrible family arguments the next day not to mention the Tournament of Roses Parade and the Rose Bowl game.

Sara arrived early New Year's Eve. She got excited about things like Magic Mountain, outer space movies, Star Trek, and over certain rock bands, creamed spinach, and pure food, but she had better basic common sense than any woman I had ever met.

Perhaps only one other, Joanna Dover, could match her good sense and kind spirit. Sara was better looking and much more faithful than any of my other current women, so this new year was not going to be so bad after all.

I had just been wished a "Happy New Year" by a local idiot news broadcaster on t.v. I disliked being wished a "Happy New Year" by some stranger. How did he know who I was? I might be a man with a 5-year-old child wired to the ceiling and gagged, hanging by her ankles as I slowly sliced her to pieces.

Sara and I had begun to celebrate and drink but it was difficult to get drunk when half the world was straining to get drunk along with you.

"Well," I said to Sara, "it ain't been a bad year. Nobody murdered me."

"And you're still able to drink every night and get up at noon every day."

"If I can just hold out another year."

"Just an old alcoholic bull."

There was a knock on the door. I couldn't believe my eyes. It was Dinky Summers, the folk rock man and his girl friend Janis.

"Dinky!" I hollered. "Hey, shit, man, what's happening?"

"I don't know, Hank. I just thought we'd drop by."

"Janis this is Sara. Sara … Janis."

Sara went out and got two more glasses. I poured. The talk wasn't much.

"I've written about ten new pieces. I think I'm getting better."

"I think he is too," said Janis, "really."

"Hey look, man, that night I opened your act… . Tell me, Hank, was I that bad?"

"Listen, Dinky, I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I was drinking more than I was listening. I was thinking of myself having to go out there and I was getting ready to face it, it makes me puke."

"But I just love to get up in front of the crowd and when I get over to them and they like my stuff I'm in heaven."

"Writing's different. You do it alone, it has nothing to do with a live audience."

"You might be right."

"I was there," said Sara. "Two guys had to help Hank up on stage. He was drunk and he was sick."

"Listen, Sara," asked Dinky, "Was my act that bad?"

"No, it wasn't. They were just impatient for Chinaski. Everything else irritated them."

"Thanks, Sara."

"Folk rock just doesn't do much for me," I said.

"What do you like?"

"Almost all the German classical composers plus a few of the Russians."

"I've written about ten new pieces."

"Maybe we can hear some?" asked Sara.

"But you don't have your guitar, do you?" I asked.

“Oh, he’s got it,” said Janis, “it’s always with him!”

Dinky got up, went out and got his instrument from the car. He sat down cross-legged on the rug and began tuning that thing. We were going to get some real live entertainment. Soon he began. He had a full, strong voice. It bounced off the walls. The song was about a woman. About a heartbreak between Dinky and some woman. It was not really too bad. Maybe up on stage with people paying it would be all right. But it was harder to tell when they were sitting on the rug in front of you. It was much too personal and embarrassing. Yet, I decided he was not really too bad. But he was in trouble. He was aging. The golden curls were not quite as golden and the wide-eyed innocence drooped a little. He would soon be in trouble.

We applauded.

“Too much, man,” I said.

“You really like it, Hank?”

I waved my hand in the air.

“You know, I’ve always dug your stuff,” he said.

“Thanks, man.”

He jumped into the next song. It also was about a woman. His woman, an ex-woman: she’d been out all night. It had some humor but I wasn’t sure if it was deliberate. Anyhow, Dinky finished and we applauded. He went into the next.

Dinky was inspired. He had a lot of volume. His feet twisted and curled in his tennis shoes and he let us hear it. Actually, it was him somehow. He didn’t look right and he didn’t quite sound right, yet the product itself was much better than what one usually heard. It made me feel low that I couldn’t praise him without reservation. But then if you lied to a man about his talent just because he was sitting across from you, that was the most unforgivable lie of them all, because that was telling him to go on, to continue which was the worst way for a man without real talent to waste his life, finally. But many people did just that, friends and relatives mostly.

Dinky rocked into the next song. He was going to give us all ten. We listened and applauded but at least my applause was the most restrained.

“That 3rd line, Dinky, I didn’t like it,” I said.

“But it’s needed, you see, because …”

“I know.”

Dinky went on. He sang all his songs. It took quite some time. There were rests in between. When the New Year finally came in Dinky and Janis and Sara and Hank still were together. But thankfully the guitar case was closed. A hung jury.

Dinky and Janis left about 1 am and Sara and I went to bed. We began hugging and kissing. I was, as I’ve explained, a kiss freak. I almost couldn’t handle it. Great kissing was seldom, rare. They never did it well in the movies or on t.v. Sara and I were in bed, body rubbing, and with the heavy good kissing. She really let herself go. It had always been the same in the past. Drayer Baba was watching up there—she’d grab my cock and I’d play with her pussy and then she’d end up rubbing my cock along her cunt and in the morning the skin of my cock would be red and raw with rubbing.

We got to the rubbing part. And then suddenly she took a hold of my cock and slid it into her cunt.

I was astounded. I didn’t know what to do.

Up and down, right? Or rather, in and out. It was like riding a bicycle: you never forget. She was a truly beautiful woman. I couldn’t hold back. I grabbed her golden red hair and pulled Sara’s mouth to mine and I came.

She got up and went to the bathroom and I looked up at my blue bedroom ceiling and I said, Drayer Baba, forgive her.

But since he never talked and he never touched money I could neither expect an answer nor could I pay him.

Sara came out of the bathroom. Her figure was slight, she was thin and tan, but totally entrancing. Sara got into the bed and we kissed. It was an easy open-mouthed love kiss.

“Happy New Year,” she said.

We slept, wrapped together.

101

I had been corresponding with Tanya and on the evening of January 5th she phoned. She had a high excited sexy voice like Betty Boop used to have. “I’m flying down tomorrow evening. Will you pick me up at the airport?”

“How will I recognize you?”

“I’ll wear a white rose.”

“Great.”

“Listen, are you sure you want me to come?”

“Yes.”

“All right, I’ll be there.”

I put down the phone. I thought of Sara. But Sara and I weren’t married. A man had a right. I was a writer. I was a dirty old man. Human relationships didn’t work anyhow. Only the first two weeks had any zing, then the participants lost their interest. Masks dropped away and real people began to appear: cranks, imbeciles, the demented, the vengeful, sadists, killers. Modern society had created its own kind and they feasted on each other. It was a duel to the death—in a cesspool. The most one could hope for in a human relationship, I decided, was two and one-half years. King Mongut of Siam had 9,000 wives and concubines; King Solomon of the Old Testament had 700 wives; August the Strong of Saxony had 365 wives, one for each day of the year. Safety in numbers.

I dialed Sara’s number. She was in.

“Hi,” I said.

“I’m glad you called,” she said, “I was just thinking of you.”

“How’s the old health food Inn doing?”

“It wasn’t a bad day.”

“You ought to raise your prices. You give your stuff away.”

“If I just break even I don’t have to pay taxes.”

“Listen, somebody phoned me tonight.”

“Who?’

"Tanya."

"Tanya?"

"Yes, we've been writing. She likes my poems."

"I saw that letter. The one she wrote. You left it lying around. She's the one who sent you the photo with her cunt showing?"

"Yes."

"And she's coming to see you?"

"Yes."

"Hank, I'm sick, I'm worse than sick. I don't know what to do."

"She's coming. I said I'd meet her at the airport."

"What are you trying to do? What does it mean?"

"Maybe I'm not a good man. There are all kinds and degrees, you know."

"That's no answer. What about you, what about me? How about us? I hate to sound like a soap opera but I've let my feelings get involved. …"

"She's coming down. Is this the end for us, then?"

"Hank, I don't know. I think so. I can't handle it."

"You've been very kind to me. I'm not sure I always know what I'm doing."

"How long is she going to be staying here?"

"Two or 3 days, I guess."

"Don't you know how I'll feel?"

"I think so… ."

"O.K., phone me when she's gone, then we'll see."

"Right."

I walked into the bathroom and looked at my face. It looked terrible. I clipped some white hairs out of my beard and some from the hair around my ears. Hello, Death. But I've had almost 6 decades. I've given you so many clean shots at me that I should have been yours long ago. I want to be buried near the racetrack … where I can hear the stretch run.

The next evening I was at the airport, waiting. I was early so I went to the bar. I ordered my drink and heard somebody sobbing. I looked around. At a table in the rear a woman was sobbing. She was a young Negress—very light in color—in a tight blue dress and she was intoxicated. She had her feet up on a chair and her dress was pulled back and there were these long smooth sexy legs. Every guy in the bar must have had a hard-on. I couldn't stop looking. She was red hot. I could visualize her on my couch, showing all that leg. I bought another drink and went over. I stood there trying not to let my hard-on show.

"Are you all right?" I asked. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Yeah, buy me a stinger."

I came back with her stinger and sat down. She had taken her feet off the chair. I sat next to her in the booth. She lit a cigarette and pressed her flank to mine. I lit a cigarette. "My name's Hank," I said. "I'm Elsie," she said. I pressed my leg against hers, moved it up and down slowly. "I'm into plumbing supplies," I said. Elsie didn't answer.

"The son-of-a-bitch left me," she finally said, "I hate him, my god. You don't know how I hate him!"

"It happens to almost everybody 6 or 8 times."

"Probably, but that doesn't help me. I just want to kill him."

"Take it easy now."

I reached down and squeezed her knee. My hard-on was so strong it hurt. I was damn near ready to come.

"Fifty dollars," Elsie said.

"For what?"

"Any way you want it."

"Do you work the airport?"

"Yeah, I sell Girl Scout cookies."

"I'm sorry. I thought you were in trouble. I have to meet my mother in 5 minutes."

I got up and walked away. A hooker! When I looked back Elsie had her feet up on the chair again, showing more than ever. I almost went back. God damn you anyhow, Tanya.

Tanya's plane made its approach, landed without crashing. I stood and waited, a little bit behind the crush of greeters. What would she be like? I didn't want to think about what I was like. The first passengers came through and I waited.

Oh, look at that one! If that were only Tanya!

Or her. My god! All that haunch. Dressed in yellow, smiling.

Or that one … in my kitchen washing the dishes.

Or that one … screaming at me, one breast fallen loose.

There had been some real women on that plane.

I felt somebody tap me on the back. I turned and behind me was this very small child. She looked about 18, thin long neck, a bit round-shouldered, long nose, but breasts, yes, and legs and a behind, yes.

"It's me," she said.

I kissed her on the cheek. "Got any baggage?"

"Yes."

"Let's go to the bar. I hate waiting for baggage."

"All right."

"You're so small… ."

"Ninety pounds."

"Jesus… ." I'd slice her in half. It would be like a child rape.

We went into the bar and took a booth. The waitress asked for Tanya's I.D. She had it ready.

"You look 18," the waitress said.

"I know," Tanya answered in her high Betty Boop voice. "I'll have a whiskey sour."

"Give me a cognac," I told the waitress.

Two booths over the high-yellow was still sitting with her dress pulled up around her ass. Her panties were pink. She kept staring at me. The waitress arrived with the drinks. We sipped them. I saw the high-yellow get up. She wobbled toward our booth. She put both hands flat on our table and leaned over. Her breath stank of booze. She looked at me.

"So this is your mother, huh, you motherfucker!"

"Mother couldn't make it."

Elsie looked at Tanya. "What do you charge, darling?"

"Fuck off," said Tanya.

"You give good head?"

"Keep it up. I'll turn you from yellow to black and blue."

"How ya gonna do it? With a bean bag?"

Then Elsie walked off shaking her ass at us. She barely made it back to her booth and then she extended those glorious legs again. Why couldn't I have both of them? King Mongut had 9,000 wives. Think of it: 365 days a year divided into 9,000. No arguments. No menstrual periods. No psychic overload. Just feast and feast and feast. It must have been very hard for King Mongut to die, or very easy. There could not have been an in-between.

"Who's that?" Tanya asked.

"That is Elsie."

"You know her?"

"She tried to pick me up. She wants $50 for a blow job."

"She pisses me … I've known a lot of groids but …"

"What's a groid?"

"A groid is a black."

"Oh."

"You never heard that?"

"Never."

"Well, I've known a lot of groids."

"O.K."

"She's got great legs, though. She almost gets me hot."

"Tanya, legs are only a part of it."

"Which part?"

"The biggest."

"Let's go get the luggage …"

As we left Elsie hollered, "Goodbye, mother!"

I didn't know which of us she was speaking to.

Back at my place we sat on the couch drinking.

"Are you unhappy that I came?" Tanya asked.

"I'm not unhappy with you …"

"You had a girl friend. You wrote me about her. Are you still together?"

"I don't know."

"You want me to leave?"

"I don't think so."

"Listen, I think you're a great writer. You're one of the few writers I can read."

"Yeah? Who are the other bastards?"

"I can't think of their names right now."

I leaned over and kissed her. Her mouth was open and wet. She gave up easily. She was a number. Ninety pounds. It was like an elephant and a churchmouse.

Tanya got up with her drink, hiked up her skirt, and straddled my legs, facing me. She wasn't wearing pants. She began rubbing her cunt against my hard-on. We grabbed and kissed and she kept rubbing. It was very effective. Wriggle, little snake child!

Then Tanya unzipped my pants. She took my cock and pushed it into her cunt. She began riding. She could do it, all 90 pounds of her. I could hardly think. I made small half-hearted movements, meeting her now and then. At times we kissed. It was gross: I was being raped by a child. She moved it around. She had me cornered, trapped. It was mad. Flesh alone, without love. We were filling the air with the stink of pure sex. My child, my child. How can your small body do all these things? Who invented woman? For what ultimate purpose? Take this shaft! And we were perfect strangers! It was like fucking your own shit.

She worked at it like a monkey on a string. Tanya was a faithful reader of all my works. She bore down. That child knew something. She could sense my anguish. She worked away furiously, playing with her clit with one finger, her head thrown back. We were caught up together in the oldest and most exciting game of all. We came together and it lasted and lasted until I thought my heart would stop. She fell against me, tiny and frail. I touched her hair. She was sweating. Then she pulled herself off me and went to the bathroom.

Child rape, finalized. They taught children well nowadays. Rapist raped. A final justice. Was she a "liberated" woman? No, she was simply red hot.

Tanya came out. We had another drink. Damn it, she began to laugh and chat, almost as if nothing had happened. Yes, that was it. It had simply been some exercise for her, like jogging or swimming.

Tanya said, “I think I’m going to have to move out of where I live. Rex is giving me a hard time.”

“Oh.”

“I mean, we don’t have sex, we never have, yet he’s so jealous. Remember the night you phoned me?”

“No.”

“Well, after I hung up he ripped the phone out of the wall.”

“‘He may be in love with you. Better be good to him.”

“Are you good to the people who love you?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Why?”

“I’m infantile; I can’t handle it.”

We drank for the remainder of the night then went to bed shortly before dawn. I hadn’t split that 90 pounds in half. She could handle me and much much more.

102

When I awakened a few hours later, Tanya was not in the bed. It was only 9 am. I found her sitting on the couch drinking out of a pint of whiskey.

"Jesus, you start early."

"I always wake up at 6 am and I get up."

"I always get up at noon. We're going to have a problem."

Tanya hit the whiskey and I went back to bed. Rising at 6 am was insanity. Her nerves must be shot. No wonder she didn't weigh anything.

She walked in. "I'm going for a walk."

"O.K."

I went back to sleep.

When I next awakened Tanya was on top of me. My cock was hard and buried into her cunt. She was riding me again. She threw back her head, arched her body back. She was doing all the work. She gave little gasps of delight and the gasps kept getting closer and closer. I also began making sounds. They got louder. I could feel myself approaching. I was right there. Then it happened. It was a good long hard climax. Then Tanya climbed off. I was still hard. Tanya put her head down there and while looking into my eyes she began to tongue the sperm off the head of my cock. She was some scullery maid.

She got up and went to the bathroom. I could hear the bath water running. It was only 10:15 am. I went back to sleep.

103

I took Tanya to Santa Anita. The current sensation was a 16 year old jockey still riding with his 5 pound bug advantage. He was from the east and was riding at Santa Anita for the first time. The track was offering a prize of $10,000 to the person who could pick the winner of the feature race, but his or her entry had to be plucked out of all the other entries. One person was drawn for each horse and it went from there.

We drove in about the 4th race and the suckers had the place filled to capacity. All the seats were gone and there was no parking left. Track personnel directed us into a nearby shopping center. They had busses to shuttle us in. They would let us walk back after the last race.

"This is madness. I feel like going back," I told Tanya.

She took a pull from her pint. "Fuck it," she said, "we're here."

After we got inside I knew a special place to sit, comfortable and isolated, and I took her there. The only thing wrong was that the children had discovered it too. They ran about kicking up dust and screaming, but it was better than standing.

"We're leaving after the 8th race," I told Tanya. "The last of these people won't get out of here until midnight."

"I'll bet a racetrack would be a good place to pick up men."

"The hookers work the clubhouse."

"Did a hooker ever pick you up out here?"

"Once, but it didn't count."

"Why?"

"I already knew her."

"Aren't you afraid of catching something?"

"Of course, that's why most men will only take head."

"You like head?"

"Why, sure."

"When do we bet?"

"Right now."

Tanya followed me to the betting windows. I went to the $5 window. She stood beside me.

“How do you know who to bet?”

“Nobody knows. Basically, it’s a simple system.”

“Like what?”

“Well, generally the best horse goes off at the shortest odds, and as the horses get progressively worse the odds mount. But, the so-called ‘best’ horse only wins one third of the time at odds of less than 3 to one.”

“Can you bet every horse in the race?”

“Yes, if you want to get poor fast.”

“Do many people win?”

“I’d say that about one person out of 20 or 25 wins.”

“Why do they come?”

“I’m no shrink, but I’m here, and I imagine a few shrinks are here too.”

I bet the 6 horse 5 win and we went out to watch the race. I always preferred a horse with early lick, especially if he had quit in his last race. The players called them “quitters” but you always got a better price for the same kind of ability that you got with a “closer.” I got 4 to one on my “quitter”; he won by 2 and Vi lengths and paid $10.20 for $2. I was $25.50 ahead.

“Let’s get a drink,” I said to Tanya. “The bartender makes the best Bloody Marys in Southern California.”

We went to the bar. They asked for Tanya’s I.D. We got our drinks.

“Who do you like in the next race?” Tanya asked.

“Zag-Zig.”

“Do you think he’ll win?”

“Do you have two breasts?”

“Have you noticed?”

“Yes.”

“Where’s the ladies’ room?”

“Turn right twice.”

As soon as Tanya left I ordered another BM. A black guy walked up to me. He was around 50. “Hank, man, how are you doing?" ' "I'm holding on."

"Man, we really miss you down at the P.O. You were one of the funniest guys we ever had. I mean, we miss you down there."

"Thanks, tell the boys I said hello."

"What are you doing now, Hank?"

"Oh, I pound a typewriter."

"What do you mean?"

"I pound a typewriter… ."

I held both hands up and tapped down at the air.

"You mean you're a clerk-typist?"

"No, I write."

"Write what?"

"Poems, short stories, novels. They pay me for that."

He looked at me. Then he turned and walked off.

Tanya came back. "Some son-of-a-bitch tried to pick me up!" "Oh? I'm sorry. I should have gone with you." "He was very brash! I really hate those types! They're slime!" "If they only had some originality it might help. They just don't have any imagination. It might be why they are alone." "I'm going to bet Zag-Zig." "I'll buy you a ticket… ."

Zag-Zig just didn't stoke up. He came up to the gate weakly, the jock stroking away the whitewach with his whip. Zag-Zig broke poorly and then loped. He beat one horse. We went back to the bar. One hell of a race for a 6 to 5 shot.

We had two Marys.

"You like head?" Tanya asked me.

"It depends. Some do it well, most don't."

"Do you ever meet any friends out here?"

"I just did, the race before this."

"A woman?"

"No, a guy, a postal clerk. I really don't have any friends."

"You've got me."

"Ninety pounds of roaring sex."

"Is that all you see in me?"

"Of course not. You have those large, large eyes."

"You're not very nice."

"Let's catch the next race."

We caught the next race. She bet hers, I bet mine. We both lost.

"Let's get out of here," I said.

"O.K.," said Tanya.

Back at my place we sat on the couch drinking. She really wasn't a bad girl. She had such a sad look about her. She wore dresses and high heels and her ankles were good. I wasn't quite sure what she expected of me. I had no desire to make her feel bad. I kissed her. She had a long thin tongue and it darted in and out of my mouth. I thought of a silverfish. There was so much sadness in everything, even when things worked.

Then Tanya unzipped me and had my cock in her mouth. She pulled it out and looked at me. She was on her knees between my legs. She stared into my eyes and ran her tongue around the head of my cock. Behind her the last of the sun was leaking through my dirty Venetian blinds. Then she went to work. She had absolutely no technique; she knew nothing about how it should be done. It was straight and simple bob and suck. As straight grotesque it was fine but it was hard to get it off on straight grotesque. I had been drinking and I didn't want to hurt her feelings. So I went into fantasyland: we were both down at the beach, and we were surrounded by 45 or 50 people, male and female, most of them in bathing trunks. They were gathered around us in a small circle. The sun was up above, the sea rolled in and out, and you could hear it. Now and then two or three seagulls circled low over our heads.

Tanya sucked and bobbed as they watched and I heard their comments: "Christ, look at her go and get it!"

"Cheap demented slut!"

"Sucking off a guy 40 years older than she is!"

"Pull her away! She's crazy!"

"No, wait! She's really getting at it!"

"And LOOK at that thing!"

"HORRIBLE!"

"Hey! I'll get her in the ass while she's doing it!"

"She's CRAZY! SUCKING OFF THAT OLD FUCK!!"

"Let's burn her back with matches!"

"LOOK AT HER GO!"

"SHE'S TOTALLY CRAZY!"

I reached down and grabbed Tanya's head and forced my cock into the center of her skull.

When she came out of the bathroom I had two drinks ready. Tanya took a sip and looked at me. "You liked it, didn't you? I could tell."

"You're right," I said. "You like symphony music?"

"Folk-rock," she said.

I went over to the radio, moved it to 160, turned it on, turned it up. We were there.

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I took Tanya to the airport the next afternoon. We had a drink in the same bar. The high-yellow wasn't around; all that leg was with somebody else.

"I'll write you," said Tanya.

"All right."

"Do you think I'm a chippy?"

"No. You love sex and there's nothing wrong with that."

"You really get off on it yourself."

"There's a lot of puritan in me. Puritans might enjoy sex more than anybody."

"You do act more innocent than any man I've ever met."

"In a sense I've always been a virgin. …"

"I wish I could say that."

"Another drink?"

"Sure."

We drank in silence. Then it was time to board. I kissed Tanya goodbye outside of security, then took the escalator down. The ride home was uneventful. I thought, well, I'm alone again. I ought to get some fucking writing done or go back to being a janitor. The postal service will never take me back. A man must ply his trade, as they say.

I arrived at the court. There was nothing in the mailbox. I sat down and dialed Sara. She was at the Inn.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"Is that bitch gone?"

"She's gone."

"How long?"

"I just put her on the plane."

"Did you like her?"

"She had some qualities."

"Do you love her?"

"No. Look, I'd like to see you."

"I don't know. It's been terribly hard for me. How do I know you won't do it again?"

"Nobody is ever quite sure of what they will do. You aren't sure what you might do."

"I know what I feel."

"Look, I don't even ask what you've been doing, Sara."

"Thanks, you're very kind."

"I'd like to see you. Tonight. Come on over."

"Hank, I just don't know. …"

"Come on over. We can just talk."

"I'm pretty damned upset. I've really gone through hell."

"Look, let me put it this way: with me, you're number one and there isn't even a number two."

"All right. I'll be over about seven. Look, there are two customers waiting… ."

"All right. See you at seven."

I hung up. Sara really was a good soul. To lose her for a Tanya was ridiculous. Yet, Tanya had brought me something. Sara deserved better treatment than I gave her. People owed each other certain loyalties even if they weren't married. In a way, the trust should run deeper because it wasn't sanctified by the law.

Well, we needed wine, good white wine.

I walked out, got in the Volks and drove up to the liquor store next to the supermarket. I like to change liquor stores frequently because the clerks got to know your habits if you went in night and day and bought huge quantities. I could feel them wondering why I wasn't dead yet and it made me uncomfortable. They probably weren't thinking any such thing, but then a man gets paranoid when he has 300 hangovers a year.

I found four bottles of good white wine in the new place and went out with them. Four young Mexican boys were standing outside.

"Hey, mister! Give us some money! Hey, man, give us some money!"

"What for?"

"We need it, man, we need it, don't you know?"

"Gonna buy some coke?"

"Pepsi-Cola, man!"

I gave them 50 cents.

(IMMORTAL WRITER COMES TO AID OF STREET URCHINS) They ran off. I opened the door to the Volks and put the wine inside. Just as I did a van drove up rapidly and the door slammed open. A woman was roughly pushed out. She was a young Mexican, about 22, no breasts, dressed in grey slacks. Her black hair was dirty and scraggly. The man in the van screamed at her: "YOU GOD DAMNED WHORE! YOU SICK FUCKING WHORE! I OUGHTA KICK YOUR STUPID ASS!"

"YOU DUMB PRICK!" she screamed back. "YOU STINK OF SHIT!"

He leaped out of the van and ran toward her. She ran off toward the liquor store. He saw me, gave up the chase, got back in the van, roared through the parking lot, and then swung off down Hollywood Boulevard.

I walked up to her.

"You all right?"

"Yes."

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, drive me down to Van Ness. Van Ness and Franklin."

"All right."

She got into the Volks and we drove off into Hollywood. I took a right, then a left and we were on Franklin.

"You got a lot of wine, haven't you?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"I think I need a drink."

"Almost everybody does only they don't know it."

"I know it."

"We can go to my place."

"O.K."

I swung the Volks around, headed back.

"I've got some money," I told her.

"$20," she said.

"You give head?"

"The best."

When we got home I poured her a glass of wine. It was warm. She didn't mind. I drank a warm one too. Then I pulled my pants off and stretched out on the bed. She followed me into the bedroom. I pulled my limp string out of my shorts. She got right down to it. She was terrible, no imagination at all.

This is pure shit, I thought.

I lifted my head up from the pillow. "Come on, baby, get with it! What the fuck are you doing?"

I was having trouble getting hard. She sucked at it and looked into my eyes. It was the worst head I had ever had. She worked about two minutes, then pulled away. She took her hankerchief out of her purse and spit into it as if she were expectorating come.

"Hey," I said, "What the hell are you trying to sell me? I didn't come."

"Yes, you did, you did!"

"Hey, I ought to know!"

"You shot into my mouth."

"Knock off the bullshit! Get on down there!"

She began again but she was just as bad. I let her work away, hoping for the best. Some whore. She bobbed and sucked. It was as if she were only pretending to do it, as if we were both just pretending. My cock got soft. She kept on.

"All right, all right," I said, "leave off. Forget it."

I got back into my pants and took out my wallet.

"Here's your twenty. You can leave now."

"How about a ride?"

"You just gave me one."

"I want to go to Franklin and Van Ness."

"All right."

We went out to the car and I took her to Van Ness. As I drove off I saw her stick out her thumb. She was hitchhiking.

When I got back I phoned Sara again.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"It's slow today."

"Are you still coming by tonight?"

"I told you I would."

"I've got some good white wine. It'll be like old times."

"Are you going to see Tanya again?"

"No."

"Don't drink anything until I get there."

"All right."

"I've got to go. … A customer just walked in."

"Good. See you tonight."

Sara was a good woman. I had to get myself straightened out. The only time a man needed a lot of women was when none of them were any good. A man could lose his identity fucking around too much. Sara deserved much better than I was giving her. It was up to me now. I stretched out on the bed and was soon asleep.

I was awakened by the telephone. "Yes?" I asked.

"Are you Henry Chinaski?"

"Yes."

"I've always adored your work. I don't think anybody writes any better than you do!"

Her voice was young and sexy.

"I have written some good stuff."

"I know. I know. Have you really had all those affairs with women?"

"Yes."

"Listen, I write too. I live in L. A. and I'd like to come see you. I'd like to show you some of my poems."

"I'm not an editor or a publisher."

"I know. Look, I'm 19. I just want to come over and visit you."

"I'm tied up tonight."

"Oh, any night would do!"

"No, I can't see you."

"Are you really Henry Chinaski, the writer?"

"I'm sure I am."

"I'm a cute chick."

"You probably are."

"My name's Rochelle."

"Goodbye, Rochelle."

I hung up. There I had done it—that time.

I walked into the kitchen, opened a bottle of vitamin E, 400 I. U. each, and downed several with half a glass of Perrier water. It was going to be a good night for Chinaski. The sun was slanting down through the Venetian blinds, making a familiar pattern on the carpet, and the white wine was chilling in the refrigerator.

I opened the door and walked out on the porch. There was a strange cat out there. He was a huge creature, a torn, with a shining black coat and luminous yellow eyes. He wasn't frightened of me. He walked up purring and rubbed against one of my legs. I was a good guy and he knew it. Animals knew things like that. They had an instinct. I walked back inside and he followed me.

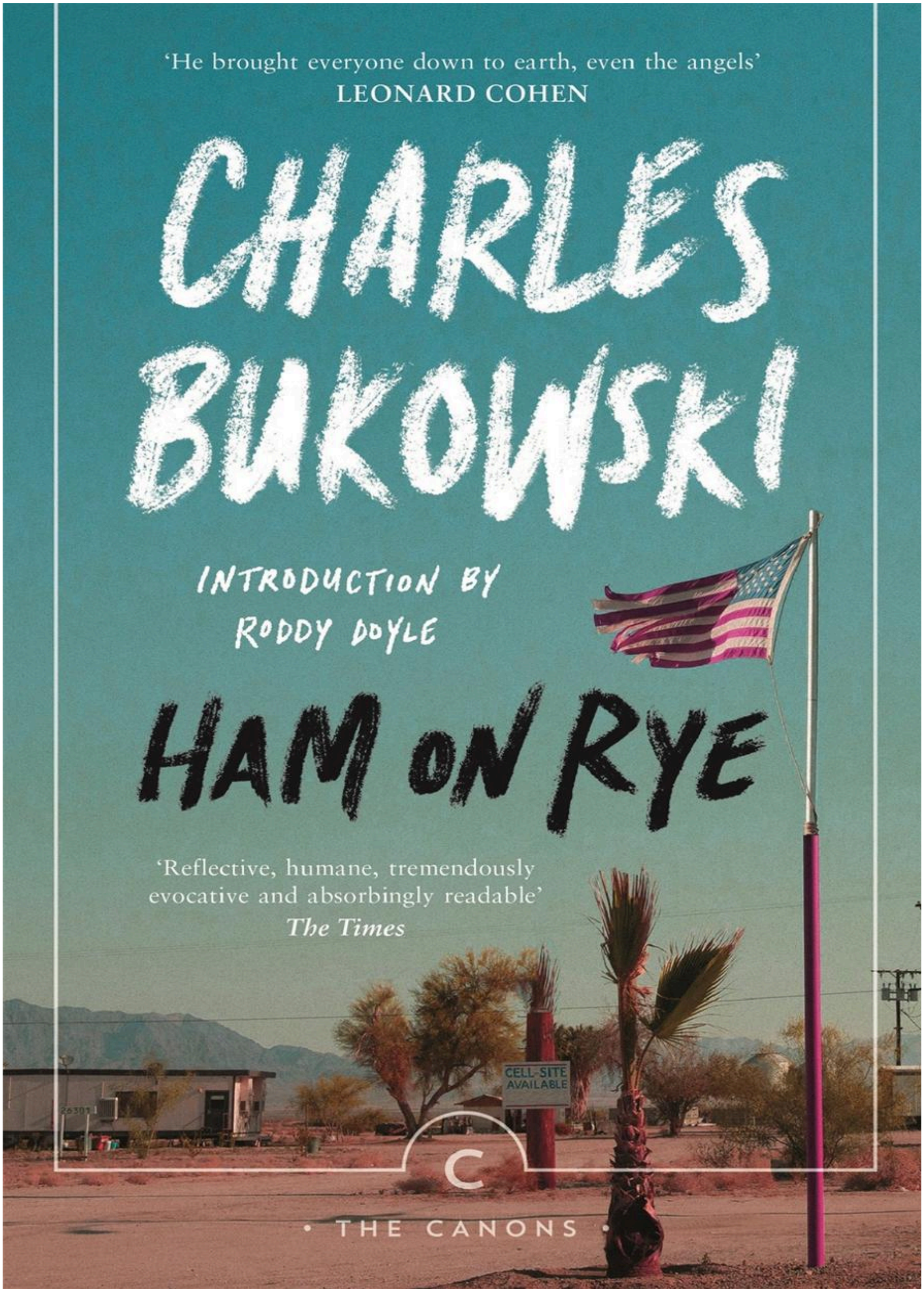
I opened him up a can of Star-Kist solid white tuna. Packed in spring water. Net wt. 7 oz.

[Bukowski.png]

CHARLES BUKOWSKI is one of America's best-known contemporary writers of poetry and prose, and, many would claim, its most influential and imitated poet. He was born in Andernach, Germany, to an American soldier father and a German mother in 1920, and brought to the United States at the age of three. He was raised in Los Angeles and lived there for fifty years. He published his first story in 1944 when he was twenty-four and began writing poetry at the age of thirty-five. He died in San Pedro, California, on March 9, 1994, at the age of seventy-three, shortly after completing his last novel, Pulp (1994).

During his lifetime he published more than forty-five books of poetry and prose, including the novels Post Office (1971), Factotum (1975), Women (1978), Ham on Rye (1982), and Hollywood (1989). Among his most recent books are the posthumous editions of What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire (1999), Open All Night: New Poems (2000), Beerspit Night and Cursing: The Correspondence of Charles Bukowski and Sheri Martinelli, 1960-1967 (2001), and Night Torn Mad with Footsteps: New Poems (2001).

All of his books have now been published in translation in over a dozen languages and his worldwide popularity remains undiminished. In the years to come Ecco will publish additional volumes of previously uncollected poetry and letters.



'He brought everyone down to earth, even the angels'
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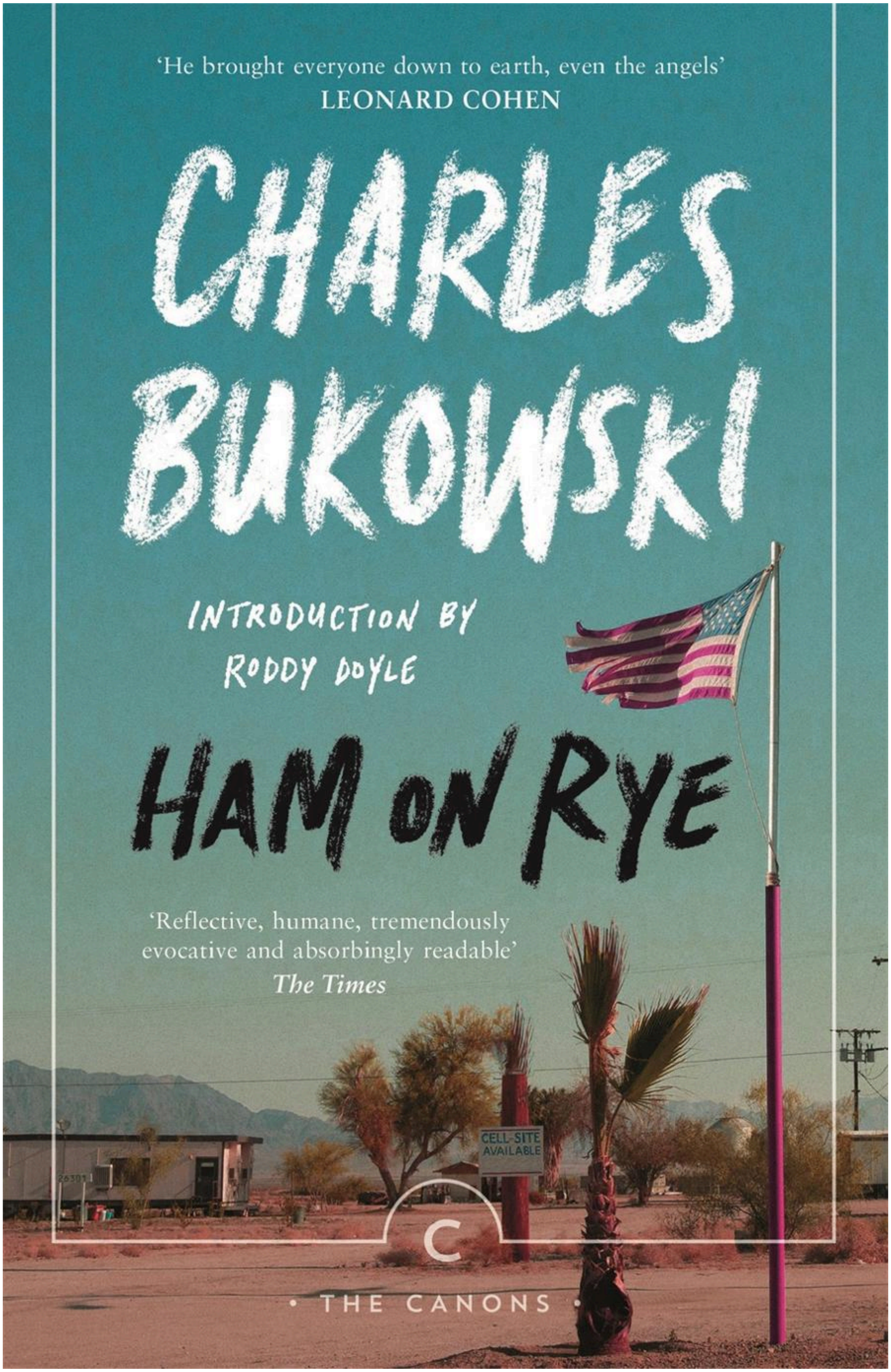
• THE CANONS •



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Ham on Rye

A NOVEL BY
CHARLES BUKOWSKI
INTRODUCTION BY
RODDY DOYLE

CANONGATE
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for all the fathers

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Introduction

BY RODDY DOYLE

'This is presented as a work of fiction and dedicated to nobody.' These are the first words I ever read by Charles Bukowski. I'd just picked up a second-hand copy of *Post Office*, his first novel. I'd never heard of the man, and the cover, a bad drawing of a postman, wasn't promising. But the words on that empty dedication page had grabbed me. 'Presented as a work of fiction' suggested that there was more than story-telling going on inside, that there was real living behind the disclaimer, and 'dedicated to nobody' yelled anger, frankness, desolation and a sense of humour that was right down my alley. I forked out the 50p and started it on the bus home.

'It began as a mistake.'

That was the first sentence, and paragraph. It was plain, yet intriguing, a good start to a crime novel perhaps, or a story of love gone wrong. I liked it, and read on.

'It was Christmas season and I learned from the drunk up the hill, who did the trick every Christmas, that they would hire damned near anybody, and so I went and the next thing I knew I had this leather sack on my back and was hiking around at my leisure. What a job, I thought.'

What writing, *I* thought. It wasn't just the words that made this a tough, real world. It was the awkwardness of the writing, its closeness to speech. '… and so I went and the next thing I knew I had this leather sack on my back.' So you went *where*? And what happened then? And *then*? It was the absence of this information that appealed to me. It reminded me of kids telling me about a video, charging through the plot of a ninety-minute film in less than thirty seconds; arms, head and shoulders supplying the action and special effects. It had the same rush, the same fight for attention. It was the men I'd listened to when I'd worked as a sweeper for Westminster Council, every lunch-time in the depot canteen. Men from Scotland, Galway, Jamaica, men who lived in hostels, council flats or nowhere, who wore their uniforms to and from work, who stood up in the canteen to describe last night's sex, who took their brown envelopes on pay-day and never came back. The book's narrator, Hank Chinaski, was one of these men. The city, Los Angeles, was different but the world was the same. Bukowski's writing was inarticulate, but deliberately so. Each word clung tight to the next; there was no room for any more. It was a tightly choreographed clumsiness. And it was great.

Fifteen or more years later, *Post Office* still seems great. Published first in 1971 when Bukowski was fifty-one, it is a book about work, 'the sweat dripping, the hangover, the impossibility of the schedule'. It is ugly – very, very ugly in places – and hilarious and more genuinely shocking than it seemed back then. The writing is relentless in its refusal to relax or sentimentalise. The boredom, pain and stress of the working day are carved into every page, and the crazy attempts at escape are carved even deeper.

And the next novel, *Factotum* (1975), was great, too. It came four years after *Post Office* and the narrator was still Hank Chinaski. But it's a younger Hank this time, falling from city to city, woman to woman. It's a fuller, more sophisticated book than *Post Office* – Hank's restlessness is brilliantly captured in the chapter breaks and jumps that fling him around America, and in and out of work. And there's a well managed, less blunt humour that the Hank of *Post Office* wouldn't have managed: 'I always started a job with the feeling that I'd soon quit or be fired, and this gave me a relaxed manner that was mistaken for intelligence or some secret power.' But it is still Bukowski, still crude, still funny, never comfortable. It's a hard, mean world he's describing. The sex is ugly and shocking but the biggest shock, when I read *Factotum* again recently, came when I read this sentence: 'At some point during one of our hellish nights World War II ended.' It's the first reference to the war, exactly halfway through the book. Hank wanders from New Orleans to

Los Angeles to New York to St Louis, through the great cities of our favourite songs, at a time when the world was sneering at their naïveté. It was a time for huge, searching books but Hank's is the small, desperate world of the next drink or meal, and the book captures it brilliantly.

Then I read *Women* (1978). The women in Bukowski's books are mean and devious, sex-mad and lazy, just like the men. They are often just parts of the body. Betty, Hank's girlfriend, or 'shackjob', in *Post Office*, is 'nice legs' and 'that ass' until page fifty when we're given her name. The first attempt at a full description comes even later: 'Betty had gotten old, fast. Heavier. The lines had come in. Flesh hung under the throat. It was sad. But I had gotten old too.' Less than twenty pages later, she's dying: 'Yellow spittle had caked at the left corner of her mouth. I took the cloth and washed it away. I cleaned her face, hands and throat.' It isn't pleasant but it's good. Hank notes the signs of age under Betty's throat and feels sorry for himself, then washes the same throat as she dies. It's a scrambling mix of selfishness and tenderness, brutality and the blackest humour that makes one want to fling the book away but is, at the same time, very, very compelling. But *Women* didn't have the mix. The tenderness, what there was of it, was gone. What was left was just a list of ugly encounters. It was boring, and I read no more Bukowski for a long time.

Until *Ham on Rye*.

It was published in 1982, when Bukowski was sixty-two, and I read it ten years after I'd last read anything by Bukowski. And the shock this time was in the newness of the world and the writing that made it. The narrator was still Chinaski but, on the evidence of the first few pages, that was all that *Ham on Rye* had in common with the earlier books.

'The first thing I remember is being under something. It was a table, I saw a table leg, I saw the legs of the people, and a portion of tablecloth hanging down. It was dark under there.' I was immediately reminded of my own book, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*, a story told in the language of a child. In that book there is an episode where Paddy watches the world from under a table – his father’s crossed legs, the socks, his mother’s movements, the dust, its beauty. He’s secure in there, happy. Little Chinaski, Henry, not yet Hank, also feels good under his table. ‘I liked being under there. It must have been in Germany. I must have been between one and two years old. It was 1922.’ The surprise delighted me. I’d never have guessed that the Chinaski of *Post Office* had once been a child, but here he was under the table – his world, his height, his priorities. ‘The legs of the people were not interesting, not like the tablecloth which hung down, not like the table, not like the sunlight.’ What impressed me most was the ability to splice the language of the small child – ‘It was a table …’ – and the language of the adult: ‘It was 1922.’ The words were the same; it was the commas and slight shifts that put the years between them. I loved this first paragraph, and I sat back to enjoy the second one.

‘Two large people fighting, screaming. People eating, always people eating.’ It was a Bukowski book, after all. It was Hank explaining how he became Hank, Bukowski explaining how he became Bukowski. And it was brilliant. Not the sunny story the first paragraph had dangled in front of me, but a scorching account of a childhood, an adolescence, a life of ugliness, pain, escape, alcohol, loneliness. It is a book about writing, finding a voice – ‘Everybody was listening. My words filled the room, from blackboard to blackboard …’ – searching the books of others for help and solidarity; DH Lawrence, Dos Passos, Hemingway: ‘… these men who had come into my life from nowhere were my only chance. They were the only voice that spoke to me.’ It is a book about history – ‘Hitler was acting up in Europe and creating jobs for the unemployed’ – and ignoring it.

It’s often very funny:

‘“I was laid when I was seven years old.”

“That’s nothing. I was laid when I was four.”’

More often it’s disturbing. But, always, it’s good. At the start of the second chapter the narrator remembers his father’s Model-T. He remembers Sunday rides to the orange groves a drive away from Los Angeles, 'miles and miles of orange trees'. He remembers a picnic basket, cans of fruit on dry ice, liverwurst and salami sandwiches, potato chips, bananas and soda-pop. He remembers counting the pyramids on his father's packet of Camels: 'Camel cigarettes were magic cigarettes.' He recalls one particular Sunday, the drive through the groves. And, suddenly, that one Sunday sneers at the rest of the Sundays, at the Sundays we've been fooled into expecting. 'Then my father kicked the door open and got out.' The picnic basket is empty. His father goes through the groves in a fury. 'He seemed angry, yanking oranges from the trees, and the branches seemed angry, leaping up and down.' This is an adult writing – 'yanking oranges from the trees' – but only a child sees angry branches, only a frightened child sees them. Yet 'frightened' and 'scared' aren't there, not in the sentence, paragraph or on the page. They're not needed. We *know*. The repetition of one word, the absence of others, the childlike observation, the dreamy detachment – this is writing by someone who remembers being terrified and can still feel it. This is Bukowski's best writing, and *Ham on Rye* is full of it. At the end of the chapter, after a humiliating encounter with the grove's owner and his shotgun, the father is driving away:

'"Daddy, we'll have a nice dinner tonight. What would you like?" my mother asked.

"Pork chops," he answered.

I had never seen him drive that fast.'

Not *so* fast, *that* fast. 'I had never seen him drive that fast.' Less drama, more power. *Ham on Rye* is a powerful book. *Post Office* was dedicated to nobody; *Ham on Rye* is dedicated to 'all the fathers'. They should all read it.

HAM ON RYE

1

The first thing I remember is being under something. It was a table, I saw a table leg, I saw the legs of the people, and a portion of the tablecloth hanging down. It was dark under there, I liked being under there. It must have been in Germany. I must have been between one and two years old. It was 1922. I felt good under the table. Nobody seemed to know that I was there. There was sunlight upon the rug and on the legs of the people. I liked the sunlight. The legs of the people were not interesting, not like the tablecloth which hung down, not like the table leg, not like the sunlight.

Then there is nothing … then a Christmas tree. Candles. Bird ornaments: birds with small berry branches in their beaks. A star. Two large people fighting, screaming. People eating, always people eating. I ate too. My spoon was bent so that if I wanted to eat I had to pick the spoon up with my right hand. If I picked it up with my left hand, the spoon bent away from my mouth. I wanted to pick the spoon up with my left hand.

Two people: one larger with curly hair, a big nose, a big mouth, much eyebrow; the larger person always seeming to be angry, often screaming; the smaller person quiet, round of face, paler, with large eyes. I was afraid of both of them. Sometimes there was a third, a fat one who wore dresses with lace at the throat. She wore a large brooch, and had many warts on her face with little hairs growing out of them. ‘Emily,’ they called her. These people didn’t seem happy together. Emily was the grandmother, my father’s mother. My father’s name was ‘Henry’. My mother’s name was ‘Katherine’. I never spoke to them by name. I was ‘Henry, Jr.’ These people spoke German most of the time and in the beginning I did too.

The first thing I remember my grandmother saying was, ‘I will bury *all* of you!’ She said this the first time just before we began eating a meal, and she was to say it many times after that, just before we began to eat. Eating seemed very important. We ate mashed potatoes and gravy, especially on Sundays. We also ate roast beef, knockwurst and sauerkraut, green peas, rhubarb, carrots, spinach, string beans, chicken, meatballs and spaghetti, sometimes mixed with ravioli; there were boiled onions, asparagus, and every Sunday there was strawberry shortcake with vanilla ice cream. For breakfasts we had french toast and sausages, or there were hotcakes or waffles with bacon and scrambled eggs on the side. And there was always coffee. But what I remember best is all the mashed potatoes and gravy and my grandmother, Emily, saying, 'I will bury *all* of you!'

She visited us often after we came to America, taking the red trolley in from Pasadena to Los Angeles. We only went to see her occasionally, driving out in the Model-T Ford.

I liked my grandmother's house. It was a small house under an overhanging mass of pepper trees. Emily had all her canaries in different cages. I remember one visit best. That evening she went about covering the cages with white hoods so that the birds could sleep. The people sat in chairs and talked. There was a piano and I sat at the piano and hit the keys and listened to the sounds as the people talked. I liked the sound of the keys best up at one end of the piano where there was hardly any sound at all – the sound the keys made was like chips of ice striking against one another.

'Will you stop that?' my father said loudly.

'Let the boy play the piano,' said my grandmother.

My mother smiled.

'That boy,' said my grandmother, 'when I tried to pick him up out of the cradle to kiss him, he reached up and hit me in the nose!'

They talked some more and I went on playing the piano.

'Why don't you get that thing tuned?' asked my father.

Then I was told that we were going to see my grandfather. My grandfather and grandmother were not living together. I was told that my grandfather was a bad man, that his breath stank.

'Why does his breath stink?'

They didn't answer.

'Why does his breath stink?'

'He drinks.'

We got into the Model-T and drove over to see my Grandfather Leonard. As we drove up and stopped he was standing on the porch of his house. He was old but he stood very straight. He had been an army officer in Germany and had come to America when he heard that the streets were paved with gold. They weren't, so he became the head of a construction firm.

The other people didn't get out of the car. Grandfather wiggled a finger at me. Somebody opened a door and I climbed out and walked toward him. His hair was pure white and long and his beard was pure white and long, and as I got closer I saw that his eyes were brilliant, like blue lights watching me. I stopped a little distance away from him.

'Henry,' he said, 'you and I, we know each other. Come into the house.'

He held out his hand. As I got closer I could smell the stink of his breath. It was very strong but he was the most beautiful man I had ever seen and I wasn't afraid.

I went into his house with him. He led me to a chair.

'Sit down, please. I'm very happy to see you.'

He went into another room. Then he came out with a little tin box.

'It's for you. Open it.'

I had trouble with the lid, I couldn't open the box.

'Here,' he said, 'let me have it.'

He loosened the lid and handed the tin box back to me. I lifted the lid and here was this cross, a German cross with a ribbon.

'Oh no,' I said, 'you keep it.'

'It's yours,' he said, 'it's just a gummy badge.'

'Thank you.'

'You better go now. They will be worried.'

'All right. Goodbye.'

'Goodbye, Henry. No, wait ...'

I stopped. He reached into a small front pocket of his pants with a couple of fingers, and tugged at a long gold chain with his other hand. Then he handed me his gold pocket watch, with the chain.

‘Thank you, Grandfather …’

They were waiting outside and I got into the Model-T and we drove off. They all talked about many things as we drove along. They were always talking, and they talked all the way back to my grandmother’s house. They spoke of many things but never, once, of my grandfather.

2

I remember the Model-T. Sitting high, the running boards seemed friendly, and on cold days, in the mornings, and often at other times, my father had to fit the hand-crank into the front of the engine and crank it many times in order to start the car.

'A man can get a broken arm doing this. It kicks back like a horse.'

We went for Sunday rides in the Model-T when grandmother didn't visit. My parents liked the orange groves, miles and miles of orange trees always either in blossom or full of oranges. My parents had a picnic basket and a metal chest. In the metal chest were frozen cans of fruit on dry ice, and in the picnic basket were weenies and liverwurst and salami sandwiches, potato chips, bananas and soda-pop. The soda-pop was shifted continually back and forth between the metal box and the picnic basket. It froze quickly, and then had to be thawed.

My father smoked Camel cigarettes and he knew many tricks and games which he showed us with the packages of Camel cigarettes. How many pyramids were there? Count them. We would count them and then he would show us more of them.

There were also tricks about the humps on the camels and about the written words on the package. Camel cigarettes were magic cigarettes.

There was a particular Sunday I can recall. The picnic basket was empty. Yet we still drove along through the orange groves, further and further away from where we lived.

'Daddy,' my mother asked, 'aren't we going to run out of gas?'

'No, there's plenty of god-damned gas.'

'Where are we going?'

'I'm going to get me some god-damned oranges!'

My mother sat very still as we drove along. My father pulled up alongside the road, parked near a wire fence and we sat there, listening. Then my father kicked the door open and got out.

‘Bring the basket.’

We all climbed through the strands of the fence.

‘Follow me,’ said my father.

Then we were between two rows of orange trees, shaded from the sun by the branches and the leaves. My father stopped and reaching up began yanking oranges from the lower branches of the nearest tree. He seemed angry, yanking the oranges from the tree, and the branches seemed angry, leaping up and down. He threw the oranges into the picnic basket which my mother held. Sometimes he missed and I chased the oranges and put them into the basket. My father went from tree to tree, yanking at the lower branches, throwing the oranges into the picnic basket.

‘Daddy, we have enough,’ said my mother.

‘Like hell.’

He kept yanking.

Then a man stepped forward, a very tall man. He held a shotgun.

‘All right, buddy, what do you think you’re doing?’

‘I’m picking oranges. There are plenty of oranges.’

‘These are my oranges. Now, listen to me, tell your woman to dump them.’

‘There are plenty of god-damned oranges. You’re not going to miss a few god-damned oranges.’

‘I’m not going to miss *any* oranges. Tell your woman to dump them.’

The man pointed his shotgun at my father.

‘Dump them,’ my father told my mother.

The oranges rolled to the ground.

‘Now,’ said the man, ‘get out of my orchard.’

‘You don’t need all these oranges.’

‘I know what I need. Now get out of here.’

‘Guys like you ought to be hung!’

‘I’m the law here. Now move!’

The man raised his shotgun again. My father turned and began walking out of the orange grove. We followed him and the man trailed us. Then we got into the car but it was one of those times when it wouldn't start. My father got out of the car to crank it. He cranked it twice and it wouldn't start. My father was beginning to sweat. The man stood at the edge of the road.

'Get that god-damned cracker box started!' he said.

My father got ready to twist the crank again. 'We're not on your property! We can stay here as long as we damn well please!'

'Like hell! Get that thing *out* of here, and fast!'

My father cranked the engine again. It sputtered, then stopped. My mother sat with the empty picnic box on her lap. I was afraid to look at the man. My father whirled the crank again and the engine started. He leaped into the car and began working the levers on the steering wheel.

'Don't come back,' said the man, 'or next time it might not go so easy for you.'

My father drove the Model-T off. The man was still standing near the road. My father was driving very fast. Then he slowed the car and made a U-turn. He drove back to where the man had stood. The man was gone. We speeded back on the way out of the orange groves.

'I'm coming back some day and get that bastard,' said my father.

'Daddy, we'll have a nice dinner tonight. What would you like?' my mother asked.

'Pork chops,' he answered.

I had never seen him drive the car that fast.

3

My father had two brothers. The younger was named Ben and the older was named John. Both were alcoholics and ne'er-do-wells. My parents often spoke of them.

'Neither of them amount to anything,' said my father.

'You just come from a bad family, Daddy,' said my mother.

'And *your* brother doesn't amount to a damn either!'

My mother's brother was in Germany. My father often spoke badly of him.

I had another uncle, Jack, who was married to my father's sister, Elinore. I had never seen my Uncle Jack or my Aunt Elinore because there were bad feelings between them and my father.

'See this scar on my hand?' asked my father. 'Well, that's where Elinore stuck me with a sharp pencil when I was very young. That scar has never gone away.'

My father didn't like people. He didn't like me. 'Children should be seen and not heard,' he told me.

It was an early Sunday afternoon without Grandma Emily.

'We should go see Ben,' said my mother. 'He's dying.'

'He borrowed all that money from Emily. He pissed it away on gambling and women and booze.'

'I know, Daddy.'

'Emily won't have any money left when she dies.'

'We should still go see Ben. They say he has only two weeks left.'

'All right, all right! We'll go!'

So we went and got into the Model-T and started driving. It took some time, and my mother had to stop for flowers. It was a long drive toward the mountains. We reached the foothills and took the little winding mountain road upwards. Uncle Ben was in a sanitarium up there, dying of TB.

'It must cost Emily a lot of money to keep Ben up here,' said my father.

'Maybe Leonard is helping.'

‘Leonard doesn’t have anything. He drank it up and he gave it away.’

‘I like Grandpa Leonard,’ I said.

‘Children should be seen and not heard,’ said my father. Then he continued, ‘Ah, that Leonard, the only time he was good to us children was when he was drunk. He’d joke with us and give us money. But the next day when he was sober he was the meanest man in the world.’

The Model-T was climbing the mountain road nicely. The air was clear and sunny.

‘Here it is,’ said my father. He guided the car into the parking lot of the sanitarium and we got out. I followed my mother and father into the building. As we entered his room, my Uncle Ben was sitting upright in bed, staring out the window. He turned and looked at us as we entered. He was a very handsome man, thin, with black hair, and he had dark eyes which glittered, were brilliant with glittering light.

‘Hello, Ben,’ said my mother.

‘Hello, Katy.’ Then he looked at me. ‘Is this Henry?’

‘Yes.’

‘Sit down.’

My father and I sat down.

My mother stood there. ‘These flowers, Ben. I don’t see a vase.’

‘They’re nice flowers, thanks, Katy. No, there isn’t a vase.’

‘I’ll go get a vase,’ said my mother.

She left the room, holding the flowers.

‘Where are all your girlfriends now, Ben?’ asked my father.

‘They come around.’

‘I’ll bet.’

‘They come around.’

‘We’re here because Katherine wanted to see you.’

‘I know.’

‘I wanted to see you too, Uncle Ben. I think you’re a real pretty man.’

‘Pretty like my ass,’ said my father.

My mother entered the room with the flowers in a vase.

‘Here, I’ll put them on this table by the window.’

‘They’re nice flowers, Katy.’

My mother sat down.

‘We can’t stay too long,’ said my father.

Uncle Ben reached under the mattress and his hand came out holding a pack of cigarettes. He took one out, struck a match and lit it. He took a long drag and exhaled.

‘You know you’re not allowed cigarettes,’ said my father. ‘I know how you get them. Those prostitutes bring them to you. Well, I’m going to tell the doctors about it and I’m going to get them to stop letting those prostitutes in here!’

‘You’re not going to do shit,’ said my uncle.

‘I got a good mind to rip that cigarette out of your mouth!’ said my father.

‘You never had a good mind,’ said my uncle.

‘Ben,’ my mother said, ‘you shouldn’t smoke, it will kill you.’

‘I’ve had a good life,’ said my uncle.

‘You never had a good life,’ said my father. ‘Lying, boozing, borrowing, whoring, drinking. You never worked a day in your life! And now you’re dying at the age of twenty-four!’

‘It’s been all right,’ said my uncle. He took another heavy drag on the Camel, then exhaled.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ said my father. ‘This man is insane!’

My father stood up. Then my mother stood up. Then I stood up.

‘Goodbye, Katy,’ said my uncle, ‘and goodbye, Henry.’ He looked at me to indicate which Henry.

We followed my father through the sanitarium halls and out into the parking lot to the Model-T. We got in, it started, and we began down the winding road out of the mountains.

‘We should have stayed longer,’ said my mother.

‘Don’t you know that TB is catching?’ asked my father.

‘I think he was a very pretty man,’ I said.

‘It’s the disease,’ said my father. ‘It makes them look like that. And besides the TB, he’s caught many other things too.’

‘What kind of things?’ I asked.

‘I can’t tell you,’ my father answered. He steered the Model-T down the winding mountain road as I wondered about that.

4

It was another Sunday that we got into the Model-T in search of my Uncle John.

'He has no ambition,' said my father. 'I don't see how he can hold his god-damned head up and look people in the eye.'

'I wish he wouldn't chew tobacco,' said my mother. 'He spits the stuff everywhere.'

'If this country was full of men like him the Chinks would take over and *we'd* be running the laundries ...'

'John never had a chance,' said my mother. 'He ran away from home early. At least you got a high-school education.'

'College,' said my father.

'Where?' asked my mother.

'The University of Indiana.'

'Jack said you only went to high school.'

'*Jack* only went to high school. That's why he gardens for the rich.'

'Am I ever going to see my Uncle Jack?' I asked.

'First let's see if we can find your Uncle John,' said my father.

'Do the Chinks really want to take over this country?' I asked.

'Those yellow devils have been waiting for centuries to do it. What's stopped them is that they have been kept busy fighting the Japs.'

'Who are the best fighters, the Chinks or the Japs?'

'The Japs. The trouble is that there are too many Chinks. When you kill a Chink he splits in half and becomes two Chinks.'

'How come their skin is yellow?'

'Because instead of drinking water they drink their own pee-pee.'

'Daddy, *don't* tell the boy that!'

'Then tell him to stop asking questions.'

We drove along through another warm Los Angeles day. My mother had on one of her pretty dresses and fancy hats. When my mother was dressed up she always sat straight and held her neck very stiff.

‘I wish we had enough money so we could help John and his family,’ said my mother.

‘It’s not my fault if they don’t have a pot to piss in,’ answered my father.

‘Daddy, John was in the war just like you were. Don’t you think he deserves something?’

‘He never rose in the ranks. I became a master sergeant.’

‘Henry, all your brothers can’t be like you.’

‘They don’t have any god-damned *drive!* They think they can live off the land!’

We drove along a bit further. Uncle John and his family lived in a small court. We went up the cracked sidewalk to a sagging porch and my father pushed the bell. The bell didn’t ring. He knocked, loudly.

‘Open up! It’s the cops!’ my father yelled.

‘Daddy, stop it!’ said my mother.

After what seemed a long time, the door opened a crack. Thenit opened further. And we could see my Aunt Anna. She was very thin, her cheeks were hollow and her eyes had pouches, dark pouches. Her voice was thin, too.

‘Oh, Henry … Katherine … come in, please …’

We followed her in. There was very little furniture. There was a breakfast nook with a table and four chairs and there were two beds. My mother and father sat in the chairs. Two girls, Katherine and Betsy (I learned their names later) were at the sink taking turns trying to scrape peanut butter out of a nearly empty peanut butter jar.

‘We were just having lunch,’ said my Aunt Anna.

The girls came over with tiny smears of peanut butter which they spread on dry pieces of bread. They kept looking into the jar and scraping with the knife.

‘Where’s John?’ asked my father.

My aunt sat down wearily. She looked very weak, very pale. Her dress was dirty, her hair uncombed, tired, sad.

‘We’ve been waiting for him. We haven’t seen him for quite some time.’

‘Where did he go?’

‘I don’t know. He just left on his motorcycle.’

‘All he does,’ said my father, ‘is think about his motorcycle.’

‘Is this Henry, Jr?’

‘Yes.’

‘He just stares. He’s so quiet.’

‘That’s the way we want him.’

‘Still water runs deep.’

‘Not with this one. The only thing that runs deep with him are the holes in his ears.’

The two girls took their slices of bread and walked outside and sat on the stoop to eat them. They hadn’t spoken to us. I thought they were quite nice. They were thin like their mother but they were still quite pretty.

‘How are you, Anna?’ asked my mother.

‘I’m all right.’

‘Anna, you don’t look well. I think you need food.’

‘Why doesn’t your boy sit down? Sit down, Henry.’

‘He likes to stand,’ said my father. ‘It makes him strong. He’s getting ready to fight the Chinks.’

‘Don’t you like the Chinese?’ my aunt asked me.

‘No,’ I answered.

‘Well, Anna,’ my father asked, ‘how are things going?’

‘Awful, really … The landlord keeps asking for the rent. He gets very nasty. He frightens me. I don’t know what to do.’

‘I hear the cops are after John,’ said my father.

‘He didn’t do very much.’

‘What did he do?’

‘He made some counterfeit dimes.’

‘*Dimes?* Jesus Christ, what kind of ambition is *that?*’

‘John really doesn’t want to be bad.’

‘Seems to me he doesn’t want to be *anything*.’

‘He would if he could.’

‘Yeah. And if a frog had wings he wouldn’t wear his ass out a-hoppin’!’

There was silence then and they sat there. I turned and looked outside. The girls were gone from the porch, they had gone off somewhere.

'Come, sit down, Henry,' said my Aunt Anna.

I stood there. 'Thank you, it's all right.'

'Anna,' my mother asked, 'are you sure that John will come back?'

'He'll come back when he gets tired of the hens,' said my father.

'John loves his children …' said Anna.

'I hear the cops are after him for something else.'

'What?'

'Rape.'

'Rape?'

'Yes, Anna, I heard about it. He was riding his motorcycle one day. This young girl was hitch-hiking. She got onto the back of his motorcycle and as they rode along all of a sudden John saw an empty garage. He drove in there, closed the door and raped the girl.'

'How did you find out?'

'Find out? The cops came and told me, they asked me where he was.'

'Did you tell them?'

'What for? To have him go to jail and evade his responsibilities? That's just what he'd want.'

'I never thought of it that way.'

'Not that I'm for rape …'

'Sometimes a man can't help what he does.'

'What?'

'I mean, after having the children, and with this type of life, the worry and all … I don't look so good anymore. He saw a young girl, she looked good to him … she got on his bike, you know, she put her arms around him …'

'What?' asked my father. 'How would *you* like to be raped?'

'I guess I wouldn't like it.'

'Well, I'm sure the young girl didn't like it either.'

A fly appeared and whirled around and around the table. We watched it.

'There's nothing to eat here,' said my father. 'The fly has come to the wrong place.'

The fly became more and more bold. It circled closer and made buzzing sounds. The closer it circled the louder the buzzing became.

'You're not going to tell the cops that John might come home?' my aunt asked my father.

'I am not going to let him off the hook so easily,' said my father.

My mother's hand leaped quickly. It closed and she brought her hand back down to the table.

'I got him,' she said.

'Got what?' asked my father.

'The fly,' she smiled.

'I don't believe you …'

'You see the fly anywhere? The fly is gone.'

'It flew off.'

'No, I have it in my hand.'

'Nobody is that quick.'

'I have it in my hand.'

'Bullshit.'

'You don't believe me?'

'No.'

'Open your mouth.'

'All right.'

My father opened his mouth and my mother cupped her hand over it. My father leaped up, grabbing at his throat.

'JESUS CHRIST!'

The fly came out of his mouth and began circling the table again.

'That's enough,' said my father, 'we're going home!'

He got up and walked out the door and down the walk and got into the Model-T and just sat there very stiffly, looking dangerous.

‘We brought you a few cans of food,’ my mother said to my aunt. ‘I’m sorry it can’t be money but Henry is afraid John will use it for gin, or for gasoline for his motorcycle. It isn’t much: soup, hash, peas …’

‘Oh, Katherine, thank you! Thank you, both …’

My mother got up and I followed her. There were two boxes of canned food in the car. I saw my father sitting there rigidly. He was still angry.

My mother handed me the smaller box of cans and she took the large box and I followed her back into the court. We set the boxes down in the breakfast nook. Aunt Anna came over and picked up a can. It was a can of peas, the label on it covered with little round green peas.

‘This is lovely,’ said my aunt.

‘Anna, we have to go. Henry’s dignity is upset.’

My aunt threw her arms around my mother. ‘Everything has been so awful. But this is like a dream. Wait until the girls come home. Wait until the girls see all these cans of food!’

My mother hugged my aunt back. Then they separated.

‘John is not a bad man,’ my aunt said.

‘I know,’ my mother answered. ‘Goodbye, Anna.’

‘Goodbye, Katherine. Goodbye, Henry.’

My mother turned and walked out the door. I followed her. We walked to the car and got in. My father started the car.

As we were driving off I saw my aunt at the door waving. My mother waved back. My father didn’t wave back. I didn’t either.

5

I had begun to dislike my father. He was always angry about something. Wherever we went he got into arguments with people. But he didn't appear to frighten most people; they often just stared at him, calmly, and he became more furious. If we ate out, which was seldom, he always found something wrong with the food and sometimes refused to pay. 'There's flyshit in this whipped cream! What the hell kind of a place is this?'

'I'm sorry, sir, you needn't pay. Just leave.'

'I'll leave, all right! But I'll be back! I'll burn this god-damned place down!'

Once we were in a drug store and my mother and I were standing to one side while my father yelled at a clerk. Another clerk asked my mother, 'Who *is* that horrible man? Every time he comes in here there's an argument.'

'That's my husband,' my mother told the clerk.

Yet, I remember another time. He was working as a milkman and made early morning deliveries. One morning he awakened me. 'Come on, I want to show you something.' I walked outside with him. I was wearing my pajamas and slippers. It was still dark, the moon was still up. We walked to the milk wagon which was horse-drawn. The horse stood very still. 'Watch,' said my father. He took a sugar cube, put it in his hand and held it out to the horse. The horse ate it out of his palm. 'Now you try it …' He put a sugar cube in my hand. It was a very large horse. 'Get closer! Hold out your hand!' I was afraid the horse would bite my hand off. The head came down; I saw the nostrils; the lips pulled back, I saw the tongue and the teeth, and then the sugar cube was gone. 'Here. Try it again …' I tried it again. The horse took the sugar cube and waggled his head. 'Now,' said my father, 'I'll take you back inside before the horse shits on you.'

I was not allowed to play with other children. 'They are bad children,' said my father, 'their parents are poor.' 'Yes,' agreed my mother. My parents wanted to be rich so they imagined themselves rich.

The first children of my age that I knew were in kindergarten. They seemed very strange, they laughed and talked and seemed happy. I didn't like them. I always felt as if I was going to be sick, to vomit, and the air seemed strangely still and white. We painted with watercolors. We planted radish seeds in a garden and some weeks later we ate them with salt. I liked the lady who taught kindergarten, I liked her better than my parents. One problem I had was going to the bathroom. I always needed to go to the bathroom, but I was ashamed to let the others know that I had to go, so I held it. It was really terrible to hold it. And the air was white, I felt like vomiting, I felt like shitting and pissing, but I didn't say anything. And when some of the others came back from the bathroom I'd think, you're dirty, you did something in there …

The little girls were nice in their short dresses, with their long hair and their beautiful eyes, but I thought, they do things in there too, even though they pretend they don't.

Kindergarten was mostly white air …

Grammar school was different, first grade to sixth grade, some of the kids were twelve years old, and we all came from poor neighborhoods. I began to go to the bathroom, but only to piss. Coming out once I saw a small boy drinking at a water fountain. A larger boy walked up behind him and jammed his face down into the water jet. When the small boy raised his head, some of his teeth were broken and blood came out of his mouth, there was blood in the fountain. 'You tell anyone about this,' the older boy told him, 'and I'll really get you.' The boy took out a handkerchief and held it to his mouth. I walked back to class where the teacher was telling us about George Washington and Valley Forge. She wore an elaborate white wig. She often slapped the palms of our hands with a ruler when she thought we were being disobedient. I don't think she ever went to the bathroom. I hated her.

Each afternoon after school there would be a fight between two of the older boys. It was always out by the back fence where there was never a teacher about. And the fights were never even; it was always a larger boy against a smaller boy and the larger boy would beat the smaller boy with his fists, backing him into the fence. The smaller boy would attempt to fight back but it was useless. Soon his face was bloody, the blood running down into his shirt. The smaller boys took their beatings wordlessly, never begging, never asking for mercy. Finally, the larger boy would back off and it would be over and all the other boys would walk home with the winner. I'd walk home quickly, alone, after holding my shit all through school and all through the fight. Usually by the time I got home I would have lost the urge to relieve myself. I used to worry about that.

6

I didn't have any friends at school, didn't want any. I felt better being alone. I sat on a bench and watched the others play and they looked foolish to me. During lunch one day I was approached by a new boy. He wore knickers, was cross-eyed and pigeon-toed. I didn't like him, he didn't look good. He sat on the bench next to me.

'Hello, my name's David.'

I didn't answer.

He opened his lunch bag. 'I've got peanut-butter sandwiches,' he said. 'What do you have?'

'Peanut-butter sandwiches.'

'I've got a banana, too. And some potato chips. Want some potato chips?'

I took some. He had plenty, they were crisp and salty, the sun shone right through them. They were good.

'Can I have some more?'

'All right.'

I took some more. He even had jelly on his peanut-butter sandwiches. It dripped out and ran over his fingers. David didn't seem to notice.

'Where do you live?' he asked.

'Virginia Road.'

'I live on Pickford. We can walk home together after school. Take some more potato chips. Who's your teacher?'

'Mrs Columbine.'

'I have Mrs Reed. I'll see you after class, we'll walk home together.'

Why did he wear those knickers? What did he want? I really didn't like him. I took some more of his potato chips.

That afternoon, after school, he found me and began walking along beside me. 'You never told me your name,' he said.

'Henry,' I answered.

As we walked along I noticed a whole gang of boys, first graders, following us. At first they were half a block behind us, then they closed the gap to several yards behind us.

'What do they want?' I asked David.

He didn't answer, just kept walking.

'Hey, knicker-shitter!' one of them yelled. 'Your mother make you shit in your knickers?'

'Pigeon-toe, ho-ho, pigeon-toe!'

'Cross-eye! Get ready to die!'

Then they circled us.

'Who's your friend? Does he kiss your rear end?'

One of them had David by the collar. He threw him onto a lawn. David stood up. A boy got down behind him on his hands and knees. The other boy shoved him and David fell over backwards. Another boy rolled him over and rubbed his face in the grass. Then they stepped back. David got up again. He didn't make a sound but the tears were rolling down his face. The largest boy walked up to him. 'We don't want you in our school, sissy. Get out of our school!' He punched David in the stomach. David bent over and as he did, the boy brought his knee up into David's face. David fell. He had a bloody nose.

Then the boys circled me. 'Your turn now!' They kept circling and as they did I kept turning. There were always some of them behind me. Here I was loaded with shit and I had to fight. I was terrified and calm at the same time. I didn't understand their motive. They kept circling and I kept turning. It went on and on. They screamed things at me but I didn't hear what they said. Finally they backed off and went away down the street. David was waiting for me. We walked down the sidewalk toward his place on Pickford Street.

Then we were in front of his house.

'I've got to go in now. Goodbye.'

'Goodbye, David.'

He went in and then I heard his mother's voice. '*David!* Look at your knickers and shirt! They're torn and full of grass stains! You do this almost every day! Tell me, why do you do it?'

David didn't answer.

'I asked you a question! Why do you do this to your clothes?'

‘I can’t *help* it, Mom …’

‘You can’t help it? You stupid boy!’

I heard her beating him. David began to cry and she beat him harder. I stood on the front lawn and listened. After a while the beating stopped. I could hear David sobbing. Then he stopped.

His mother said, ‘Now, I want you to practice your violin lesson.’

I sat down on the lawn and waited. Then I heard the violin. It was a very sad violin. I didn’t like the way David played. I sat and listened for some time but the music didn’t get any better. The shit had hardened inside of me. I no longer felt like shitting. The afternoon light hurt my eyes. I felt like vomiting. I got up and walked home.

7

There were continual fights. The teachers didn't seem to know anything about them. And there was always trouble when it rained. Any boy who brought an umbrella to school or wore a raincoat was singled out. Most of our parents were too poor to buy us such things. And when they did, we hid them in the bushes. Anybody seen carrying an umbrella or wearing a raincoat was considered a sissy. They were beaten after school. David's mother had him carry an umbrella whenever it was the least bit cloudy.

There were two recess periods. The first graders gathered at their own baseball diamond and the teams were chosen. David and I stood together. It was always the same. I was chosen next to last and David was chosen last, so we always played on different teams. David was worse than I was. With his crossed eyes, he couldn't even see the ball. I needed lots of practice. I had never played with the kids in the neighborhood. I didn't know how to catch a ball or how to hit one. But I wanted to, I liked it. David was afraid of the ball, I wasn't. I swung hard, I swung harder than anybody but I could never hit the ball. I always struck out. Once I fouled a ball off. That felt good. Another time I drew a walk. When I got to first, the first baseman said, 'That's the only way you'll ever get here.' I stood and looked at him. He was chewing gum and he had long black hairs coming out of his nostrils. His hair was thick with vaseline. He wore a perpetual sneer.

'What are you looking at?' he asked me.

I didn't know what to say. I wasn't used to conversation.

'The guys say you're crazy,' he told me, 'but you don't scare me. I'll be waiting for you after school some day.'

I kept looking at him. He had a terrible face. Then the pitcher wound up and I broke for second. I ran like crazy and slid into second. The ball arrived late. The tag was late.

'You're *out!*' screamed the boy whose turn it was to umpire. I got up, not believing it.

‘I said, “YOU’RE OUT!”’ the umpire screamed.

Then I knew that I was not accepted. David and I were not accepted. The others wanted me ‘out’ because I was *supposed* to *be* ‘out.’ They knew David and I were friends. It was because of David that I wasn’t wanted. As I walked off the diamond I saw David playing third base in his knickers. His blue and yellow stockings had fallen down around his feet. Why had he chosen me? I was a marked man. That afternoon after school I quickly left class and walked home alone, without David. I didn’t want to watch him beaten again by our classmates or by his mother. I didn’t want to listen to his sad violin. But the next day at lunchtime, when he sat down next to me I ate his potato chips.

My day came. I was tall and I felt very powerful at the plate. I couldn’t believe that I was as bad as they wished me to be. I swung wildly but with force. I knew I was strong, and maybe like they said, ‘crazy.’ But I had this feeling inside of me that something real was there. Just hardened shit, maybe, but that was more than they had. I was up at bat. ‘Hey, it’s the STRIKEOUT KING! MR WINDMILL!’ The ball arrived. I swung and I felt the bat connect like I had wanted it to do for so long. The ball went up, up and HIGH, into left field,’ way OVER the left fielder’s head. His name was Don Brubaker and he stood and watched it fly over his head. It looked like it was never going to come down. Then Brubaker started running after the ball. He wanted to throw me out. He would never do it. The ball landed and rolled onto a diamond where some 5th graders were playing. I ran slowly to first, hit the bag, looked at the guy on first, ran slowly to second, touched it, ran to third where David stood, ignored him, tagged third and walked to home plate. Never such a day. Never such a home run by a first grader! As I stepped on home plate I heard one of the players, Irving Bone, say to the team captain, Stanley Greenberg, ‘Let’s put him on the regular team.’ (The regular team played teams from other schools.) ‘No,’ said Stanley Greenberg.

Stanley was right. I never hit another home run. I struck out most of the time. But they always remembered that home run and while they still hated me, it was a better kind of hatred, like they weren't quite sure *why*.

Football season was worse. We played touch football. I couldn't catch the football or throw it but I got into one game. When the runner came through I grabbed him by the shirt collar and threw him on the ground. When he started to get up, I kicked him. I didn't like him. It was the first baseman with vaseline in his hair and the hair in his nostrils. Stanley Greenberg came over. He was larger than any of us. He could have killed me if he'd wanted to. He was our leader. Whatever he said, that was it. He told me, 'You don't understand the rules. No more football for you.'

I was moved into volleyball. I played volleyball with David and the others. It wasn't any good. They yelled and screamed and got excited, but the *others* were playing football. I wanted to play football. All I needed was a little practice. Volleyball was shameful. Girls played volleyball. After a while I wouldn't play. I just stood in the center of the field where nobody was playing. I was the only one who would not play anything. I stood there each day and waited through the two recess sessions, until they were over.

One day while I was standing there, more trouble came. A football sailed from high behind me and hit me on the head. It knocked me to the ground. I was very dizzy. They stood around snickering and laughing. 'Oh, look, Henry fainted! Henry fainted like a lady! Oh, look at Henry!'

I got up while the sun spun around. Then it stood still. The sky moved closer and flattened out. It was like being in a cage. They stood around me, faces, noses, mouths and eyes. Because they were taunting me I thought they had deliberately hit me with the football. It was unfair.

'Who kicked that ball?' I asked.

'You wanna know who kicked the ball?'

'Yes.'

'What are you going to do when you find out?'

I didn't answer.

‘It was Billy Sherril,’ somebody said.

Billy was a round fat boy, really nicer than most, but he was one of them. I began walking toward Billy. He stood there. When I got close he swung. I almost didn’t feel it. I hit him behind his left ear and when he grabbed his ear I hit him in the stomach. He fell to the ground. He stayed down. ‘Get up and fight him, Billy,’ said Stanley Greenberg. Stanley lifted Billy up and pushed him toward me. I punched Billy in the mouth and he grabbed his mouth with both hands.

‘OK,’ said Stanley, ‘I’ll take his place!’

The boys cheered. I decided to run, I didn’t want to die. But then a teacher came up. ‘What’s going on here?’ It was Mr Hall.

‘Henry picked on Billy,’ said Stanley Greenberg.

‘Is that right, boys?’ asked Mr Hall.

‘Yes,’ they said.

Mr Hall took me by the ear all the way to the principal’s office. He pushed me into a chair in front of an empty desk and then knocked on the principal’s door. He was in there for some time and when he came out he left without looking at me. I sat there five or ten minutes before the principal came out and sat behind the desk. He was a very dignified man with a mass of white hair and a blue bow tie. He looked like a real gentleman. His name was Mr Knox. Mr Knox folded his hands and looked at me without speaking. When he did that I was not so sure that he was a gentleman. He seemed to want to humble me, treat me like the others.

‘Well,’ he said at last, ‘tell me what happened.’

‘Nothing happened.’

‘You hurt that boy, Billy Sherril. His parents are going to want to know why.’

I didn’t answer.

‘Do you think you can take matters into your own hands when something happens you don’t like?’

‘No.’

‘Then why did you do it?’

I didn’t answer.

‘Do you think you’re better than other people?’

‘No.’

Mr Knox sat there. He had a long letter opener and he slid it back and forth on the green felt padding of the desk. He had a large bottle of green ink on his desk and a pen holder with four pens. I wondered if he would beat me.

‘Then why did you do what you did?’

I didn’t answer. Mr Knox slid the letter opener back and forth. The phone rang. He picked it up.

‘Hello? Oh, Mrs Kirby? He what? What? Listen, can’t *you* administer the discipline? I’m busy now. All right, I’ll phone you when I’m done with this one …’

He hung up. He brushed his fine white hair back out of his eyes with one hand and looked at me.

‘Why do you cause me all this trouble?’

I didn’t answer him.

‘You think you’re tough, huh?’

I kept silent.

‘Tough kid, huh?’

There was a fly circling Mr Knox’s desk. It hovered over his green ink bottle. Then it landed on the black cap of the ink bottle and sat there rubbing its wings.

‘OK, kid, you’re tough and I’m tough. Let’s shake hands on that.’

I didn’t think I was tough so I didn’t give him my hand.

‘Come on, give me your hand.’

I stretched my hand out and he took it and began shaking it. Then he stopped shaking it and looked at me. He had blue clear eyes lighter than the blue of his bow tie. His eyes were almost beautiful. He kept looking at me and holding my hand. His grip began to tighten.

‘I want to congratulate you for being a tough guy.’

His grip tightened some more.

‘Do you think I’m a tough guy?’

I didn’t answer.

He crushed the bones of my fingers together. I could feel the bone of each finger cutting like a blade into the flesh of the finger next to it. Shots of red flashed before my eyes.

'Do you think I'm a tough guy?' he asked.

'I'll kill you,' I said.

'You'll what?'

Mr Knox tightened his grip. He had a hand like a vise. I could see every pore in his face.

'Tough guys don't scream, do they?'

I couldn't look at his face anymore. I put my face down on the desk.

'Am I a tough guy?' asked Mr Knox.

He squeezed harder. I had to scream, but I kept it as quiet as possible so no one in the classes could hear me.

'Now, am I a tough guy?'

I waited. I hated to say it. Then I said, 'Yes.'

Mr Knox let go of my hand. I was afraid to look at it. I let it hang by my side. I noticed that the fly was gone and I thought, it's not so bad to be a fly. Mr Knox was writing on a piece of paper.

'Now, Henry, I'm writing a little note to your parents and I want you to deliver it to them. And you *will* deliver it to them, won't you?'

'Yes.'

He folded the note into an envelope and handed it to me. The envelope was sealed and I had no desire to open it.

8

I took the envelope home to my mother and handed it to her and walked into the bedroom. My bedroom. The best thing about the bedroom was the bed. I liked to stay in bed for hours, even during the day with the covers pulled up to my chin. It was good in there, nothing ever occurred in there, no people, nothing. My mother often found me in bed in the daytime.

'Henry, get up! It's not good for a young boy to lay in bed all day! Now, get up! *Do* something!'

But there was nothing to do.

I didn't go to bed that day. My mother was reading the note. Soon I heard her crying. Then she was wailing. 'Oh, my god! You've disgraced your father and myself! It's a disgrace! Suppose the neighbors find out? What will the neighbors think?'

They never spoke to their neighbors.

Then the door opened and my mother came running into the room: '*How could you have done this to your mother?*'

The tears were running down her face. I felt guilty.

'*Wait until your father gets home!*'

She slammed the bedroom door and I sat in the chair and waited. Somehow I felt guilty …

I heard my father come in. He always slammed the door, walked heavily, and talked loudly. He was home. After a few moments the bedroom door opened. He was six feet two, a large man. Everything vanished, the chair I was sitting in, the wallpaper, the walls, all of my thoughts. He was the dark covering the sun, the violence of him made everything else utterly disappear. He was all ears, nose, mouth, I couldn't look at his eyes, there was only his red angry face.

'All right, Henry. Into the bathroom.'

I walked in and he closed the door behind us. The walls were white. There was a bathroom mirror and a small window, the screen black and broken. There was the bathtub and the toilet and the tiles. He reached and took down the razor strop which hung from a hook. It was going to be the first of many such beatings, which would recur more and more often. Always, I felt, without real reason.

'All right, take down your pants.'

I took my pants down.

'Pull down your shorts.'

I pulled them down.

Then he laid on the strop. The first blow inflicted more shock than pain. The second hurt more. Each blow which followed increased the pain. At first I was aware of the walls, the toilet, the tub. Finally I couldn't see anything. As he beat me, he berated me, but I couldn't understand the words. I thought about his roses, how he grew roses in the yard. I thought about his automobile in the garage. I tried not to scream. I knew that if I did scream he might stop, but knowing this, and knowing his desire for me to scream, prevented me. The tears ran from my eyes as I remained silent. After a while it all became just a whirlpool, a jumble, and there was only the deadly possibility of being there forever. Finally, like something jerked into action, I began to sob, swallowing and choking on the salt slime that ran down my throat. He stopped.

He was no longer there. I became aware of the little window again and the mirror. There was the razor strop hanging from the hook, long and brown and twisted. I couldn't bend over to pull up my pants or my shorts and I walked to the door, awkwardly, my clothes around my feet. I opened the bathroom door and there was my mother standing in the hall.

'It wasn't right,' I told her. 'Why didn't you help me?'

'The father,' she said, 'is always right.'

Then my mother walked away. I went to my bedroom, dragging my clothing around my feet and sat on the edge of the bed. The mattress hurt me. Outside, through the rear screen I could see my father's roses growing. They were red and white and yellow, large and full. The sun was very low but not yet set and the last of it slanted through the rear window. I felt that even the sun belonged to my father, that I had no right to it because it was shining upon my father's house. I was like his roses, something that belonged to him and not to me …

9

By the time they called me to dinner I was able to pull up my clothing and walk to the breakfast nook where we ate all our meals except on Sunday. There were two pillows on my chair. I sat on them but my legs and ass still burned. My father was talking about his job, as always.

'I told Sullivan to combine three routes into two and let one man go from each shift. Nobody is really pulling their weight around there …'

'They ought to listen to you, Daddy,' said my mother.

'Please,' I said, 'please excuse me but I don't feel like eating …'

'You'll eat your FOOD!' said my father. 'Your mother prepared this food!'

'Yes,' said my mother, 'carrots and peas and roast beef.'

'And the mashed potatoes and gravy,' said my father.

'I'm not hungry.'

'You will eat every carrot, and pee on your plate!' said my father.

He was trying to be funny. That was one of his favorite remarks.

'DADDY!' said my mother in shocked disbelief.

I began eating. It was terrible. I felt as if I were eating *them*, what they believed in, what they were. I didn't chew any of it, I just swallowed it to get rid of it. Meanwhile my father was talking about how good it all tasted, how lucky we were to be eating good food when most of the people in the world, and many even in America, were starving and poor.

'What's for dessert, Mama?' my father asked.

His face was horrible, the lips pushed out, greasy and wet with pleasure. He acted as if nothing had happened, as if he hadn't beaten me. When I was back in my bedroom I thought, these people are not my parents, they must have adopted me and now they are unhappy with what I have become.

10

Lila Jane was a girl my age who lived next door. I still wasn't allowed to play with the children in the neighborhood, but sitting in the bedroom often got dull. I would go out and walk around in the backyard, looking at things, bugs mostly. Or I would sit on the grass and imagine things. One thing I imagined was that I was a great baseball player, so great that I could get a hit every time at bat, or a home run anytime I wanted to. But I would deliberately make outs just to trick the other team. I got my hits when I felt like it. One season, going into July, I was hitting only .139 with one home run. HENRY CHINASKI IS FINISHED, the newspapers said. Then I began to hit. And how I hit! At one time I allowed myself 16 home runs in a row. Another time I batted in 24 runs in one game. By the end of the season I was hitting .523.

Lila Jane was one of the pretty girls I'd seen at school. She was one of the nicest, and she was living right next door. One day when I was in the yard she came up to the fence and stood there looking at me.

'You don't play with the other boys, do you?'

I looked at her. She had long red-brown hair and dark brown eyes.

'No,' I said, 'no, I don't.'

'Why not?'

'I see them enough at school.'

'I'm Lila Jane,' she said.

'I'm Henry.'

She kept looking at me and I sat there on the grass and looked at her. Then she said, 'Do you want to see my panties?'

'Sure,' I said.

She lifted her dress. The panties were pink and clean. They looked good. She kept holding her dress up and then turned around so that I could see her behind. Her behind looked nice. Then she pulled her dress down. 'Goodbye,' she said and walked off.

‘Goodbye,’ I said.

It happened each afternoon. ‘Do you want to see my panties?’

‘Sure.’

The panties were nearly always a different color and each time they looked better.

One afternoon after Lila Jane showed me her panties I said, ‘Let’s go for a walk.’

‘All right,’ she said.

I met her in front and we walked down the street together. She was really pretty. We walked along without saying anything until we came to a vacant lot. The weeds were tall and green.

‘Let’s go into the vacant lot,’ I said.

‘All right,’ said Lila Jane.

We walked out into the tall weeds.

‘Show me your panties again.’

She lifted her dress. Blue panties.

‘Let’s stretch out here,’ I said.

We got down in the weeds and I grabbed her by the hair and kissed her. Then I pulled up her dress and looked at her panties. I put my hand on her behind and kissed her again. I kept kissing her and grabbing at her behind. I did this for quite a long time. Then I said, ‘Let’s do it.’ I wasn’t sure what there was to do but I felt there was more.

‘No, I can’t,’ she said.

‘Why not?’

‘Those men will see.’

‘What men?’

‘There!’ she pointed.

I looked between the weeds. Maybe half a block away some men were working repairing the street.

‘They can’t see us!’

‘Yes, they can!’

I got up. ‘God damn it!’ I said and I walked out of the lot and went back home.

I didn’t see Lila Jane again for a while in the afternoons. It didn’t matter. It was football season and I was – in my imagination – a great quarterback. I could throw the ball 90 yards and kick it 80. But we seldom had to kick, not when I carried the ball. I was best running into grown men. I crushed them. It took five or six men to tackle me. Sometimes, like in baseball, I felt sorry for everybody and I allowed myself to be tackled after only gaining 8 or 10 yards. Then I usually got injured, badly, and they had to carry me off the field. My team would fall behind, say 40 to 17, and with 3 or 4 minutes left to play I'd return, angry that I had been injured. Every time I got the ball I ran all the way to a touchdown. How the crowd screamed! And on defense I made every tackle, intercepted every pass. I was everywhere. Chinaski, the Fury! With the gun ready to go off I took the kick-off deep in my own end zone. I ran forward, sideways, backwards. I broke tackle after tackle, I leaped over fallen tacklers. I wasn't getting any blocking. My team was a bunch of sissies. Finally, with five men hanging on to me I refused to fall and dragged them over the goal line for the winning touchdown.

I looked up one afternoon as a big guy entered our yard through the back gate. He walked in and just stood there looking at me. He was a year or so older than I was and he wasn't from my grammar school. 'I'm from Marmount Grammar School,' he said.

'You better get out of here,' I told him. 'My father will be coming home soon.'

'Is that right?' he asked.

I stood up. 'What are you doing here?'

'I hear you guys from Delsey Grammar think you're tough.'

'We win all the inter-school games.'

'That's because you cheat. We don't like cheaters at Marmount.'

He had on an old blue shirt, half unbuttoned in front. He had a leather thong on his left wrist.

'You think you're tough?' he asked me.

'No.'

‘What do you have in your garage? I think I’ll take something from your garage.’

‘Stay out of there.’

The garage doors were open and he walked past me. There wasn’t much in there. He found an old deflated beach ball and picked it up.

‘I think I’ll take this.’

‘Put it down.’

‘Down your throat!’ he said and then he threw it at my head. I ducked. He came out of the garage toward me. I backed up.

He followed me into the yard. ‘Cheaters never prosper!’ he said. He swung at me. I ducked. I could feel the wind from his swing. I closed my eyes, rushed him and started punching. I was hitting something, sometimes. I could feel myself getting hit but it didn’t hurt. Mostly I was scared. There was nothing to do but to keep punching. Then I heard a voice: ‘Stop it!’ It was Lila Jane. She was in my backyard. We both stopped fighting. She took an old tin can and threw it. It hit the boy from Marmount in the middle of the forehead and bounced off. He stood there a moment and then ran off, crying and howling. He ran out the rear gate and down the alley and was gone. A little tin can. I was surprised, a big guy like him crying like that. At Delsey we had a code. We never made a sound. Even the sissies took their beatings silently. Those guys from Marmount weren’t much.

‘You didn’t have to help me,’ I told Lila Jane.

‘He was hitting you!’

‘He wasn’t hurting me.’

Lila Jane ran off through the yard, out the rear gate, then into her yard and into her house.

Lila Jane still likes me, I thought.

11

During the second and third grades I still didn't get a chance to play baseball but I knew that somehow I was developing into a player. If I ever got a bat in my hands again I knew I would hit it over the school building. One day I was standing around and a teacher came up to me.

'What are you doing?'

'Nothing.'

'This is Physical Education. You should be participating. Are you disabled?'

'What?'

'Is there anything wrong with you?'

'I don't know.'

'Come with me.'

He walked me over to a group. They were playing kickball. Kickball was like baseball except they used a soccer ball. The pitcher rolled it to the plate and you kicked it. If it went on a fly and was caught you were out. If it rolled on through the infield or you kicked it high between the fielders you took as many bases as you could.

'What's your name?' the teacher asked me.

'Henry.'

He walked up to the group. 'Now,' he said, 'Henry is going to play shortstop.'

They were from my grade. They all knew me. Shortstop was the toughest position. I went out there. I knew they were going to gang up on me. The pitcher rolled the ball real slow and the first guy kicked it right at me. It came hard, chest high, but it was no problem. The ball was big and I stuck out my hands and caught it. I threw the ball to the pitcher. The next guy did the same thing. It came a little higher this time. And a little faster. No problem. Then Stanley Greenberg walked up to the plate. That was it. I was out of luck. The pitcher rolled the ball and Stanley kicked it. It came at me like a cannonball, head high. I wanted to duck but didn't. The ball smashed into my hands and

I held it. I took the ball and rolled it to the pitcher’s mound. Three outs. I trotted to the sideline. As I did, some guy passed me and said, ‘Chinaski, the great shitstop!’

It was the boy with the vaseline in his hair and the long black nostril hairs. I spun around. ‘Hey!’ I said. He stopped. I looked at him. ‘Don’t ever say anything to me again.’ I saw the fear in his eyes. He walked out to his position and I went and leaned against the fence while our team came to the plate. Nobody stood near me but I didn’t care. I was gaining ground.

It was difficult to understand. We were the children in the poorest school, we had the poorest, least-educated parents, most of us lived on terrible food, and yet boy for boy we were much bigger than the boys from other grammar schools around the city. Our school was famous. We were feared.

Our 6th grade team beat the other 6th grade teams in the city very badly. Especially in baseball. Scores like 14 to 1, 24 to 3, 19 to 2. We just could hit the ball.

One day the City-Champion-Junior-High-School team, Miranda Bell, challenged us. Somehow money was raised and each of our players was given a new blue cap with a white ‘D’ in front. Our team looked good in those caps. When the Miranda Bell guys showed up, the 7th grade champs, our 6th grade guys just looked at them and laughed. We were bigger, we looked tougher, we walked differently, we knew something that they didn’t know. We younger guys laughed too. We knew we had them where we wanted them.

The Miranda guys looked too polite. They were very quiet. Their pitcher was their biggest player. He struck out our first three batters, some of our best hitters. But we had Lowball Johnson. Lowball did the same to them. It went on like that, both sides striking out, or hitting little grounders and an occasional single, but nothing else. Then we were at bat in the bottom of the 7th. Beefcake Cappalletti nailed one. God, you could hear the shot! The ball looked like it was going to hit the school building and break a window. Never had I seen a ball take off like that! It hit the flagpole near the top and bounced back in. Easy home run. Cappalletti rounded the bases and our guys looked *good* in their new blue caps with the white ‘D.’

The Miranda guys just quit after that. They didn’t know how to come back. They came from a wealthy district, they didn’t know what it meant to fight back. Our next guy doubled. How we screamed! It was over. There was nothing they could do. The next batter tripled. They changed pitchers. He walked the next guy. The next batter singled. Before the inning was over we had scored nine runs.

Miranda never got a chance to bat in the 8th. Our 5th graders went over and challenged them to fight. Even one of the 4th graders ran over and picked a fight with one of them. The Miranda guys took their equipment and left. We ran them off, up the street.

There was nothing left to do so a couple of our guys got into a fight. It was a good one. They both had bloody noses but were swinging good when one of the teachers who had stayed to watch the game broke it up. He didn’t know how close he came to getting jumped himself.

12

One night my father took me on his milk route. There were no longer any horse-drawn wagons. The milk trucks now had engines. After loading up at the milk company we drove off on his route. I liked being out in the very early morning. The moon was up and I could see the stars. It was cold but it was exciting. I wondered why my father had asked me to come along since he had taken to beating me with the razor strop once or twice a week and we weren't getting along.

At each stop he would jump out and deliver a bottle or two of milk. Sometimes it was cottage cheese or buttermilk or butter and now and then a bottle of orange juice. Most of the people left notes in the empty bottles explaining what they wanted.

My father drove along, stopping and starting, making deliveries.

'OK, kid, which direction are we driving in now?'

'North.'

'You're right. We're going north.'

We went up and down streets, stopping and starting.

'OK, which way are we going now?'

'West.'

'No, we're going south.'

We drove along in silence some more.

'Suppose I pushed you out of the truck now and left you on the sidewalk, what would you do?'

'I don't know.'

'I mean, how would you live?'

'Well, I guess I'd go back and drink the milk and orange juice you just left on the porch steps.'

'Then what would you do?'

'I'd find a policeman and tell him what you did.'

'You would, huh? And what would you tell him?'

'I'd tell him that you told me that "west" was "south" because you wanted me to get lost.'

It began to get light. Soon all the deliveries were made and we stopped at a cafe to have breakfast. The waitress walked over. ‘Hello, Henry,’ she said to my father.

‘Hello, Betty.’

‘Who’s the kid?’ asked Betty.

‘That’s little Henry.’

‘He looks just like you.’

‘He doesn’t have my brains, though.’

‘I hope not.’

We ordered. We had bacon and eggs. As we ate my father said, ‘Now comes the hard part.’

‘What is that?’

‘I have to collect the money people owe me. Some of them don’t want to pay.’

‘They ought to pay.’

‘That’s what I tell them.’

We finished eating and started driving again. My father got out and knocked on doors. I could hear him complaining loudly, ‘HOW THE HELL DO YOU THINK *I’M* GOING TO EAT? YOU’VE SUCKED UP THE MILK, NOW IT’S TIME FOR YOU TO SHIT OUT THE MONEY!’

He used a different line each time. Sometimes he came back with the money, sometimes he didn’t.

Then I saw him enter a court of bungalows. A door opened and a woman stood there dressed in a loose silken kimono. She was smoking a cigarette. ‘Listen, baby, I’ve got to have the money. You’re into me deeper than anybody!’

She laughed at him.

‘Look, baby, just give me half, give me a payment, something to show.’

She blew a smoke ring, reached out and broke it with her finger.

‘Listen, you’ve got to pay me,’ my father said. ‘This is a desperate situation.’

‘Come on in. We’ll talk about it,’ said the woman.

My father went in and the door closed. He was in there for a long time. The sun was really up. When my father came out his hair was hanging down around his face and he was pushing his shirt tail into his pants. He climbed into the truck.

'Did that woman give you the money?' I asked.

'That was the last stop,' said my father. 'I can't take it any more. We'll return the truck and go home …'

I was to see that woman again. One day I came home after school and she was sitting on a chair in the front room of our house. My mother and father were sitting there too and my mother was crying. When my mother saw me she stood up and ran toward me, grabbed me. She took me into the bedroom and sat me on the bed. 'Henry, do you love your mother?' I really didn't but she looked so sad that I said, 'Yes.' She took me back into the other room.

'Your father says he loves this woman,' she said to me.

'I love *both* of you! Now get that kid out of here!'

I felt that my father was making my mother very unhappy.

'I'll kill you,' I told my father.

'Get that kid out of here!'

'How can you love that woman?' I asked my father. 'Look at her nose. She has a nose like an elephant!'

'Christ!' said the woman, 'I don't have to take this!' She looked at my father: '*Choose*, Henry! One or the other! Now!'

'But I can't! I love you both!'

'I'll kill you!' I told my father.

He walked over and slapped me on the ear, knocking me to the floor. The woman got up and ran out of the house and my father went after her. The woman leaped into my father's car, started it and drove off down the street. It happened very quickly. My father ran down the street after her and the car. 'EDNA! EDNA, COME BACK!' My father actually caught up with the car, reached into the front seat and grabbed Edna's purse. Then the car speeded up and my father was left with the purse.

'I knew something was going on,' my mother told me. 'So I hid in the car trunk and I caught them together. Your father drove me back here with that horrible woman. Now she's got his car.'

My father walked back with Edna's purse. 'Everybody into the house!' We went inside and my father locked me in the bedroom and my mother and father began arguing. It was loud and very ugly. Then my father began beating my mother. She screamed and he kept beating her. I climbed out a window and tried to get in the front door. It was locked. I tried the rear door, the windows. Everything was locked. I stood in the backyard and listened to the screaming and the beating.

Then the beating and the screaming stopped and all I could hear was my mother sobbing. She sobbed a long time. It gradually grew less and less and then she stopped.

13

I was in the 4th grade when I found out about it. I was probably one of the last to know, because I still didn't talk to anybody. A boy walked up to me while I was standing around at recess.

'Don't you know how it happens?' he asked.

'What?'

'Fucking.'

'What's that?'

'Your mother has a hole …' – he took the thumb and forefinger of his right hand and made a circle – 'and your father has a dong …' – he took his left forefinger and ran it back and forth through the hole. 'Then your father's dong shoots juice and sometimes your mother has a baby and sometimes she doesn't.'

'God makes babies,' I said.

'Like shit,' the kid said and walked off. It was hard for me to believe. When recess was over I sat in class and thought about it. My mother had a hole and my father had a dong that shot juice. How could they have things like that and walk around as if everything was normal, and talk about things, and then do it and not tell anybody? I really felt like puking when I thought that I had started off as my father's juice.

That night after the lights were out I stayed awake in bed and listened. Sure enough, I began to hear sounds. Their bed began creaking. I could hear the springs. I got out of bed and tiptoed down to their door and listened. The bed kept making sounds. Then it stopped. I hurried back down the hall and into my bedroom. I heard my mother go into the bathroom. I heard the toilet flush and then she walked out.

What a terrible thing! No wonder they did it in secret! And to think, everybody did it! The teachers, the principal, everybody! It was pretty stupid. Then I thought about doing it with Lila Jane and it didn't seem so dumb.

The next day in class I thought about it all day. I looked at the little girls and imagined myself doing it with them. I would do it with all of them and make babies, I'd fill the world with guys like me, great baseball players, home-run hitters. That day just before class ended the teacher, Mrs Westphal, said: 'Henry, will you stay after class?'

The bell rang and the other children left. I sat at my desk and waited. Mrs Westphal was correcting papers. I thought, maybe she wants to do it with me. I imagined pulling her dress up and looking at her hole. 'All right, Mrs Westphal, I'm ready.'

She looked up from her papers. 'All right, Henry, first erase all the blackboards. Then take the erasers outside and dust them.'

I did as I was told, then sat back down at my desk. Mrs Westphal just sat there correcting papers. She had on a tight blue dress, she wore large golden earrings, had a tiny nose and wore rimless glasses. I waited and waited. Then I said, 'Mrs Westphal, why did you keep me after school?'

She looked up and stared at me. Her eyes were green and deep. 'I kept you after school because sometimes you're bad.'

'Oh, yeah?' I smiled.

Mrs Westphal looked at me. She took her glasses off and kept staring. Her legs were behind the desk. I couldn't look up her dress.

'You were *very* inattentive today, Henry.'

'Yeah?'

'"Yes" is the word. You're addressing a lady!'

'Oh, I know …'

'Don't get sassy with me!'

'Whatever you say.'

Mrs Westphal stood up and came out from behind her desk. She walked down the aisle and sat on the top of the desk across from me. She had nice long legs in silk stockings. She smiled at me, reached out a hand and touched one of my wrists.

'Your parents don't give you much love, do they?'

'I don't need that stuff,' I told her.

'Henry, everybody needs love.'

‘I don’t need anything.’

‘You poor boy.’

She stood up, came to my desk and slowly took my head in her hands. She bent over and pressed it against her breasts. I reached around and grabbed her legs.

‘Henry, you must stop fighting everybody! We want to help you.’

I grabbed Mrs Westphal’s legs harder. ‘All right,’ I said, ‘let’s fuck!’

Mrs Westphal pushed me away and stood back.

‘*What did you say?*’

‘I said, “let’s fuck!”’

She looked at me a long time. Then she said, ‘Henry, I am *never* going to tell anybody what you said, not the principal or your parents or anybody. But I never, *never* want you to say that to me again, do you understand?’

‘I understand.’

‘All right. You can go home now.’

I got up and walked toward the door. When I opened it, Mrs Westphal said, ‘Good afternoon, Henry.’

‘Good afternoon, Mrs Westphal.’

I walked down the street wondering about it. I felt she wanted to fuck but was afraid because I was too young for her and that my parents or the principal might find out. It had been exciting being in the room with her alone. This thing about fucking was nice. It gave people extra things to think about.

There was one large boulevard to cross on the way home. I entered the crosswalk. Suddenly there was a car coming right at me. It didn’t slow down. It was weaving wildly. I tried to run out of its path but it appeared to follow me. I saw headlights, wheels, a bumper. The car hit me and then there was blackness …

14

Later in the hospital they were dabbing at my knees with pieces of cotton that had been soaked in something. It burned. My elbows burned too.

The doctor was bending over me with a nurse. I was in bed and the sun came through the window. It seemed very pleasant. The doctor smiled at me. The nurse straightened up and smiled at me. It was nice there.

‘Do you have a name?’ the doctor asked.

‘Henry.’

‘Henry what?’

‘Chinaski.’

‘Polish, eh?’

‘German.’

‘How come nobody wants to be Polish?’

‘I was born in Germany.’

‘Where do you live?’ asked the nurse.

‘With my parents.’

‘Really?’ asked the doctor. ‘And where is that?’

‘What happened to my elbows and knees?’

‘A car ran you over. Luckily, the wheels missed you. Witnesses said he appeared to be drunk. Hit and run. But they got his license. They’ll get him.’

‘You have a pretty nurse …’ I said.

‘Well, thank you,’ she said.

‘Do you want a date with her?’ asked the doctor.

‘What’s that?’

‘Do you want to go out with her?’ the doctor asked.

‘I don’t know if I could do it with her. I’m too young.’

‘Do what?’

‘You know.’

‘Well,’ the nurse smiled, ‘come see me after your knees heal up and we’ll see what we can do.’

‘Pardon me,’ said the doctor, ‘but I have to see another accident case.’ He left the room.

‘Now,’ said the nurse, ‘what street do you live on?’

‘Virginia Road.’

‘Give me the number, sweetie.’

I told her the house number. She asked if there was a telephone. I told her that I didn’t know the number.

‘That’s all right,’ she said, ‘we’ll get it. And don’t worry. You were lucky. You just got a bump on the head and skinned up a little.’

She was nice but I knew that after my knees healed, she wouldn’t want to see me again.

‘I want to stay here,’ I told her.

‘What? You mean, you don’t want to go home to your parents?’

‘No. Let me stay here.’

‘We can’t do that, sweetie. We need these beds for people who are really sick and injured.’

She smiled and walked out of the room.

When my father came he walked straight into the room and without a word scooped me out of bed. He carried me out of the room and down the hallway.

‘You little bastard! Didn’t I teach you to look BOTH ways before you cross the street?’

He rushed me down the hall. We passed the nurse.

‘Goodbye, Henry,’ she said.

‘Goodbye.’

We got into an elevator with an old man in a wheelchair. A nurse was standing behind him. The elevator began to descend.

‘I think I’m going to die,’ the old man said. ‘I don’t want to die. I’m afraid to die …’

‘You’ve lived long enough, you old fart!’ muttered my father.

The old man looked startled. The elevator stopped. The door remained closed. Then I noticed the elevator operator. He sat on a small stool. He was a dwarf dressed in a bright red uniform with a red cap.

The dwarf looked at my father. ‘Sir,’ he said, ‘you are a repugnant fool!’

‘Shortcake,’ replied my father, ‘open the fucking door or it’s your ass.’

The door opened. We went out the entrance. My father carried me across the hospital lawn. I still had on a hospital gown. My father carried my clothes in a bag in one hand. The wind blew back my gown and I saw my skinned knees which were not bandaged and were painted with iodine. My father was almost running across the lawn.

‘When they catch that son-of-a-bitch,’ he said, ‘I’ll sue him! I’ll sue him for his last penny! He’ll support me the rest of his life! I’m sick of that god-damned milk truck! *Golden State Creamery!* Golden State, my hairy ass! We’ll move to the South Seas. We’ll live on coconuts and pineapples!’

My father reached the car and put me in the front seat. Then he got in on his side. He started the car.

‘I hate drunks! My father was a drunk. My brothers are drunks. Drunks are *weak*. Drunks are *cowards*. And hit-and-run drunks should be jailed for the rest of their lives!’

As we drove toward home he continued to talk to me.

‘Do you know that in the South Seas the natives live in grass shacks? They get up in the morning and the food falls from the trees to the ground. They just pick it up and eat it, coconuts and pineapple. And the natives think that white men are gods! They catch fish and roast boar, and their girls dance and wear grass skirts and rub their men behind the ears. Golden State Creamery, my hairy *ass!*’

But my father’s dream was not to be. They caught the man who hit me and put him in jail. He had a wife and three children and didn’t have a job. He was a penniless drunkard. The man sat in jail for some time but my father didn’t press charges. As he said, ‘You can’t get blood out of a fucking turnip!’

15

My father always ran the neighborhood kids away from our house. I was told not to play with them but I walked down the street and watched them anyhow.

‘Hey, Heinie!’ they yelled, ‘Why don’t you go back to Germany?’

Somehow they had found out about my birthplace. The worst thing was that they were all about my age and they not only hung together because they lived in the same neighborhood but because they went to the same Catholic school. They were tough kids, they played tackle football for hours and almost every day a couple of them got into a fist fight. The four main guys were Chuck, Eddie, Gene and Frank.

‘Hey, Heinie, go back to Krautland!’

There was no getting in with them …

Then a red-headed kid moved in next door to Chuck. He went to some kind of special school. I was sitting on the curb one day when he came out of his house. He sat on the curb next to me.

‘Hi, my name’s Red.’

‘I’m Henry.’

We sat there and watched the guys play football. I looked at Red.

‘How come you got a glove on your left hand?’ I asked.

‘I’ve only got one arm,’ he said.

‘That hand looks real.’

‘It’s fake. It’s a fake arm. Touch it.’

‘What?’

‘Touch it. It’s fake.’

I felt it. It was hard, rock hard.

‘How’d that happen?’

‘I was born that way. The arm’s fake all the way up to the elbow. I’ve got to strap it on. I’ve got little fingers at the end of my elbow, fingernails and all, but the fingers aren’t any good.’

‘You got any friends?’ I asked.

‘No.’

'Me neither.'

'Those guys won't play with you?'

'No.'

'I got a football.'

'Can you catch it?'

'Straight shit,' said Red.

'Go get it.'

'OK …'

Red went back to his father's garage and came out with a football. He tossed it to me. Then he backed across his front lawn.

'Go on, throw it …'

I let it go. His good arm came around and his bad arm came around and he caught it. The arm made a slight squeaking sound as he caught the football.

'Nice catch,' I said. 'Now wing me one!'

He cocked his arm and let it fly; it came like a bullet and I managed to hold onto it as it dug into my stomach.

'You're standing too close,' I told him. 'Step back some more.'

At last, I thought, some practice catching and throwing. It felt real good.

Then I was the quarterback. I rolled back, straight-armed an invisible tackler, and let go a spiral fly. It fell short. Red ran forward, leaped, caught the ball, rolled over three or four times and still held onto it.

'You're good, Red. How'd you get so good?'

'My father taught me. We practice a lot.'

Then Red walked back and let one sail. It looked to be over my head as I ran back for it. There was a hedge between Red's house and Chuck's house and I fell into the hedge going for the ball. The ball hit the top of the hedge and bounced over. I went around to Chuck's yard to get the ball. Chuck passed the ball to me. 'So you got yourself a freak friend, hey, Heinie?'

It was a couple of days later and Red and I were on his front lawn passing and kicking the football. Chuck and his friends weren't around. Red and I were getting better and better.

Practice, that’s all it took. All a guy needed was a chance. Somebody was always controlling who got a chance and who didn’t.

I caught one over the shoulder, whirled and winged it back to Red who leaped high and came down with it. Maybe some day we’d play for USC. Then I saw five boys walking down the sidewalk toward us. They weren’t guys from my grammar school. They were our age and looked like trouble. Red and I kept throwing the ball and they stood watching us.

Then one of the guys stepped onto the lawn. The biggest.

‘Throw me the ball,’ he said to Red.

‘Why?’

‘I wanna see if I can catch it.’

‘I don’t care if you can catch it or not.’

‘Throw me the ball!’

‘He’s got one arm,’ I said. ‘Leave him alone.’

‘Stay out of this, monkey-face!’ Then he looked at Red. ‘Throw me the ball.’

‘Go to hell!’ said Red.

‘Get the ball!’ the big guy said to the others. They ran at us. Red turned and threw the ball on the roof of his house. The roof was slanted and the ball rolled back down but managed to stick behind a drain pipe. Then they were on us. Five to two, I thought, there’s no chance. I caught a fist on the temple, swung and missed. Somebody kicked me in the ass. It was a good one and burned all the way up the spine. Then I heard a cracking sound, it was almost like a rifle shot and one of them was down on the ground holding his forehead.

‘Oh shit,’ he said, ‘my skull is crushed!’

I saw Red and he was standing in the center of the lawn. He was holding the hand of his fake arm with the hand of his good arm. It was like a club. Then he swung again. There was another loud crack and another of them was down on the lawn. I began to feel brave and I landed a punch right on a guy’s mouth. I saw the lip split and the blood began to dribble down his chin. The other two ran off. Then the big guy who had gone down first got up and the other one got up. They held their heads. The guy with the bloody mouth stood there. Then they retreated down the street together. When they got quite a way down the big guy turned around and said, ‘We’ll be back!’

Red began running toward them and I ran behind Red. They started running and Red and I stopped chasing them after they turned the corner. We walked back, found a ladder in the garage. We got the football down and began throwing it back and forth …

One Saturday Red and I decided to go swimming at the public pool down on Bimini Street. Red was a strange guy. He didn’t talk much but I didn’t talk much either and we got along. There was nothing to say anyhow. The only thing I ever really asked him about was his school but he just said it was a special school and that it cost his father some money.

We arrived at the pool in the early afternoon, got our lockers, and took our clothes off. We had our swimming trunks on underneath. Then I saw Red unhitch his arm and put it in his locker. It was the first time since the fight I had seen him without his fake arm. I tried not to look at his arm which ended at the elbow. We walked to the place where you had to soak your feet in a chlorine solution. It stank but it stopped the spread of athlete’s foot or something. Then we walked to the pool and got in. The water stank too and after I was in I pissed in it. There were people of all ages in the pool, men and women, boys and girls. Red really liked the water. He leaped up and down in it. Then he ducked under and came up. He spit water out of his mouth. I tried to swim. I couldn’t help noticing Red’s half-arm, couldn’t help looking at it. I always made sure to look at it when I thought he was occupied with something else. It ended at the elbow, sort of rounded off, and I saw the little fingers. I didn’t want to stare real hard, but it seemed as if there were only three or four of them, very tiny, curled up there. They were very *red* and each of the tiny fingers had a little fingernail. Nothing was going to grow anymore; it had all stopped. I didn’t want to think about it. I dove under. I was going to scare Red. I was going to grab his legs from behind. I came up against something soft. My face went right into it. It was a fat woman's ass. I felt her grab me by the hair and she pulled me up out of the water. She had on a blue bathing cap and the strap was tight around her chin, digging into her flesh. Her front teeth were capped with silver and her breath smelled of garlic.

'You dirty little pervert! Trying for free grabs, are you?'

I pushed away from her and backed off. As I moved backwards she followed me through the water, her sagging breasts pushing a tidal wave in front of her.

'You dirty little prick. You wanna suck my titties? You got a dirty mind, huh? You wanna eat my shit? How about some of my shit, little prick?'

I backed up further into the deeper water. I was now standing on my toes, moving backwards. I swallowed some water. She kept coming, a steamship of a woman. I couldn't retreat any further. She moved right up to me. Her eyes were pale and blank, there wasn't any color in them. I felt her body touching mine.

'Touch my cunt,' she said. 'I know you want to touch it, so go ahead, touch my cunt. Touch it, touch it!'

She waited.

'If you don't, I'm going to tell the lifeguard you molested me and you'll be put in jail! Now, touch it!'

I couldn't do it. Suddenly she reached under and grabbed my parts and yanked. She almost tore my dong off. I fell backwards into the deep water, sank, struggled, and came to the top. I was six feet away from her and began swimming toward shallow water.

'I'm going to tell the lifeguard you molested me!' she screamed.

Then a man swam between us. 'That little son-of-a-bitch!' she pointed at me and screamed at the man. 'He grabbed my *cunt!*'

'Lady,' said the man, 'the boy probably thought it was the grate over the drain.'

I swam over to Red.

‘Listen,’ I said, ‘we’ve got to get out of here! That fat lady is going to tell the lifeguard that I touched her cunt!’

‘What’d you do that for?’ Red asked.

‘I wanted to see what it felt like.’

‘What’d it feel like?’

We got out of the pool, showered. Red put his arm back on and we dressed. ‘Did you really do it?’ he asked.

‘A guy’s got to get started sometime.’

It was a month or so later that Red’s family moved. One day they were gone. Just like that. Red never said anything in advance to me. He was gone, the football was gone, and those tiny red fingers with fingernails, they were gone. He was a good guy.

16

I didn’t know exactly why but Chuck, Eddie, Gene and Frank let me join them in some of their games. I think it started when another guy showed up and they needed three on a side. I still required more practice to get really good but I was getting better. Saturday was the best day. That’s when we had our big games, other guys joined in, and we played football in the street. We played tackle on the lawns but when we played in the street we played touch. There was more passing then because you couldn’t get far with a run in touch.

There was trouble at the house, much fighting between my mother and my father, and as a consequence, they kind of forgot about me. I got to play football each Saturday. During one game I broke into the open behind the last pass defender and I saw Chuck wing the ball. It was a long high spiral and I kept running. I looked back over my shoulder, I saw it coming, it fell right into my hands and I held it and was in for the touchdown.

Then I heard my father’s voice yell ‘HENRY!’ He was standing in front of his house. I lobbed the ball to one of the guys on my team so they could kick off and I walked down to where my father stood. He looked angry. I could almost feel his anger. He always stood with one foot a little bit forward, his face flushed, and I could see his pot belly going up and down with his breathing. He was six feet two and like I said, he looked to be all ears, mouth and nose when angry. I couldn’t look at his eyes.

‘All right,’ he said, ‘you’re old enough to mow the lawn now. You’re big enough to mow it, edge it, water it, and water the flowers. It’s time you did something around here. It’s time you got off your dead ass!’

‘But I’m playing football with the guys. Saturday is the only real chance I have.’

‘Are you talking back to me?’

‘No.’

I could see my mother watching from behind a curtain. Every Saturday they cleaned the whole house. They vacuumed the rugs and polished the furniture. They took up the rugs and waxed the hardwood floors and then covered the floors with the rugs again. You couldn't even see where they had been waxed.

The lawn-mower and edger were in the driveway. He showed them to me. 'Now, you take this mower and go up and down the lawn and don't miss any places. Dump the grass catcher here whenever it gets full. Now, when you've mowed the lawn in one direction and finished, take the mower and mow the lawn in the other direction, get it? First, you mow it north and south, then you mow it east and west. Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

'And don't look so god-damned unhappy or I'll really give you something to be *unhappy* about! After you've finished mowing, then you take the edger. You trim the edges of the lawn with the little mower on the edger. Get *under* the hedge, get *every* blade of grass! Then … you take this circular blade on the edger and you *cut* along the edge of the lawn. It must be absolutely *straight* along the edge of the lawn! Understand?'

'Yes.'

'Now when you're done with that, you take these …'

My father showed me some shears. '… and you get down on your knees and you go around cutting off any *hairs* that are still sticking up. Then you take the hose and you water the hedges and the flower beds. Then you turn on the sprinkler and you let it run fifteen minutes on each part of the lawn. You do all this on the front lawn and in the flower garden, and then you repeat it on the rear lawn and in the flower garden there. Are there any questions?'

'No.'

'All right, now I want to tell you this. I am going to come out and check everything when you're finished, and when you're done I DON'T WANT TO SEE ONE HAIR STICKING UP IN

EITHER THE FRONT OR BACK LAWN! NOT ONE HAIR! IF THERE IS …!'

He turned, walked up the driveway, across his porch, opened the door, slammed it, and he was gone inside of his house. I took the mower, rolled it up the drive and began pushing it on its first run, north and south. I could hear the guys down the street playing football …

I finished mowing, edging and clipping the front lawn. I watered the flower beds, set the sprinkler going and began working my way toward the backyard. There was a stretch of lawn in the center of the driveway leading to the back. I got that too. I didn't know if I was unhappy. I felt too miserable to be unhappy. It was like everything in the world had turned to lawn and I was just pushing my way through it all. I kept pushing and working but then suddenly I gave up. It would take hours, all day, and the game would be over. The guys would go in to eat dinner, Saturday would be finished, and I'd still be mowing.

As I began mowing the back lawn I noticed my mother and my father standing on the back porch watching me. They just stood there silently, not moving. Once as I pushed the mower past I heard my mother say to my father, 'Look, he doesn't sweat like you do when you mow the lawn. Look how *calm* he looks.'

'CALM? HE'S NOT CALM, HE'S DEAD!'

When I came by again, I heard him: 'PUSH THAT THING FASTER! YOU MOVE LIKE A SNAIL!'

I pushed it faster. It was hard to do but it felt good. I pushed it faster and faster. I was almost running with the mower. The grass flew back so hard that much of it flew over the grass catcher. I knew that would anger him.

'YOU SON-OF-A-BITCH!' he screamed.

I saw him run off the back porch and into the garage. He came out with a two-by-four about a foot long. From the corner of my eye I saw him throw it. I saw it coming but made no attempt to avoid it. It hit me on the back of my right leg. The pain was terrible. The leg knotted up and I had to force myself to walk. I kept pushing the mower, trying not to limp. When I swung around to cut another section of the lawn the two-by-four was in the way. I picked it up, moved it aside and kept mowing. The pain was getting worse. Then my father was standing beside me.

'STOP!'

I stopped.

'I want you to go back and mow the lawn over again where you didn't catch the grass in the catcher! Do you *understand* me?'

'Yes.'

My father walked back into the house. I saw him and my mother standing on the back porch watching me.

The end of the job was to sweep up all the grass that had fallen on the sidewalk, and then wash the sidewalk down. I was finally finished except for sprinkling each section of the lawn in the backyard for fifteen minutes. I dragged the hose back to set up the sprinkler when my father stepped out of the house.

'Before you start sprinkling I want to check this lawn for hairs.'

My father walked to the center of the lawn, got down on his hands and knees and placed the side of his head low against the lawn looking for any blade of grass that might be sticking up. He kept looking, twisting his neck, peering around. I waited.

'AH HAH!'

He leaped up and ran toward the house.

'MAMA! MAMA!'

He ran into the house.

'What is it?'

'I found a *hair!*'

'You did?'

'Come, I'll show you!'

He came out of the house quickly with my mother following.

'Here! Here! I'll show you!'

He got down on his hands and knees.

‘I can see it! I can see *two* of them!’

My mother got down with him. I wondered if they were crazy.

‘See them?’ he asked her. ‘*Two* hairs. See them?’

‘Yes, Daddy, I see them …’

They both got up. My mother walked into the house. My father looked at me.

‘Inside …’

I walked to the porch and inside the house. My father followed me.

‘Into the bathroom.’

My father closed the door.

‘Take your pants down.’

I heard him get down the razor strop. My right leg still ached. It didn’t help, having felt the strop many times before. The whole world was out there indifferent to it all, but that didn’t help. Millions of people were out there, dogs and cats and gophers, buildings, streets, but it didn’t matter. There was only father and the razor strop and the bathroom and me. He used that strop to sharpen his razor, and early in the mornings I used to hate him with his face white with lather, standing before the mirror shaving himself. Then the first blow of the strop hit me. The sound of the strop was flat and loud, the sound itself was almost as bad as the pain. The strop landed again. It was as if my father was a machine, swinging that strop. There was the feeling of being in a tomb. The strop landed again and I thought, that is surely the last one. But it wasn’t. It landed again. I didn’t hate him. He was just unbelievable, I just wanted to get away from him. I couldn’t cry. I was too sick to cry, too confused. The strop landed once again. Then he stopped. I stood and waited. I heard him hanging up the strop.

‘Next time,’ he said, ‘I don’t want to find any hairs.’

I heard him walk out of the bathroom. He closed the bathroom door. The walls were beautiful, the bathtub was beautiful, the wash basin and the shower curtain were beautiful, and even the toilet was beautiful. My father was gone.

17

Of all the guys left in the neighborhood, Frank was the nicest. We got to be friends, we got to going around together, we didn't need the other guys much. They had more or less kicked Frank out of the group, anyway, so he became friends with me. He wasn't like David, who had walked home from school with me. Frank had a lot more going for him than David had. I even joined the Catholic Church because Frank went there. My parents liked me going to church. The Sunday masses were very boring. And we had to go to Catechism classes. We had to study the Catechism book. It was just boring questions and answers.

One afternoon we were sitting on my front porch and I was reading the Catechism out loud to Frank. I read the line, 'God has bodily eyes and sees all things.'

'Bodily eyes?' Frank asked.

'Yes.'

'You mean like this?' he asked.

He clenched his hands into fists and placed them over his eyes.

'He has milk bottles for eyes,' Frank said, pushing his fists against his eyes and turning toward me. Then he began laughing. I began laughing too. We laughed a long time. Then Frank stopped.

'You think He heard us?'

'I guess so. If He can see everything He can probably hear everything too.'

'I'm scared,' said Frank. 'He might kill us. Do you think He'll kill us?'

'I don't know.'

'We better sit here and wait. Don't move. Sit still.'

We sat on the steps and waited. We waited a long time.

'Maybe He isn't going to do it now,' I said.

'He's going to take His time,' said Frank.

We waited another hour, then we walked down to Frank's place. He was building a model airplane and I wanted to take a look at it …

The afternoon came when we decided to go to our first confession.We walked to the church. We knew one of the priests, the main man. We had met him in an ice-cream parlor and he had spoken to us. We had even gone to his house once. He lived in a place next to the church with an old woman. We stayed quite a while and asked all sorts of questions about God. Like, how tall was He? And did He just sit in a chair all day? And did He go to the bathroom like everybody else? The priest never did answer our questions directly but still he seemed like a nice guy, he had a nice smile.

We walked to the church thinking about confession, thinking about what it would be like. As we got near the church a stray dog began walking along with us. He looked very thin and hungry. We stopped and petted him, scratched his back.

‘It’s too bad dogs can’t go to heaven,’ said Frank.

‘Why can’t they?’

‘You gotta be baptized to go to heaven.’

‘We ought to baptize him.’

‘Think we should?’

‘He deserves a chance to go to heaven.’

I picked him up and we walked into the church. We took him to the bowl of holy water and I held him there as Frank sprinkled the water on his forehead.

‘I hereby baptize you,’ said Frank.

We took him outside and put him back on the sidewalk again.

‘He even looks different,’ I said.

The dog lost interest and walked off down the sidewalk. We went back into the church, stopping first at the holy water, dipping our fingers into it and making the sign of the cross. We both kneeled at a pew near the confessional booth and waited. A fat woman came out from behind the curtain. She had body odor. I could smell her strong odor as she walked past. Her smell was mixed with the smell of the church, which smelled like piss. Every Sunday people came to mass and smelled that piss-smell and nobody said anything. I was going to tell the priest about it but I couldn’t. Maybe it was the candles.

‘I’m going in,’ said Frank.

Then he got up, walked behind the curtain and was gone. He was in there a long time. When he came out he was grinning.

‘It was great, just great! You go in there now!’

I got up, pulled the curtain back and walked in. It was dark. I kneeled down. All I could see in front of me was a screen. Frank said God was back in there. I kneeled and tried to think of something bad that I had done, but I couldn’t think of anything. I just knelt there and tried and tried to think of something but I couldn’t. I didn’t know what to do.

‘*Go ahead,*’ said a voice. ‘*Say something!*’

The voice sounded angry. I didn’t think there would be any voice. I thought God had plenty of time. I was frightened. I decided to lie.

‘All right,’ I said. ‘I … kicked my father. I … cursed my mother … I stole money from my mother’s purse. I spent it on candy bars. I let the air out of Chuck’s football. I looked up a little girl’s dress. I kicked my mother. I ate some of my snot. That’s about all. Except today I baptized a dog.’

‘*You baptized a dog?*’

I was finished. A Mortal Sin. No use going on. I got up to leave. I didn’t know if the voice recommended my saying some Hail Marys or if the voice didn’t say anything at all. I pulled the curtain back and there was Frank waiting. We walked out of the church and were back on the street.

‘I feel cleansed,’ said Frank, ‘don’t you?’

‘No.’

I never went to confession again. It was worse than ten o’clock mass.

18

Frank liked airplanes. He lent me all his pulp magazines about World War I. The best was *Flying Aces*. The dog-fights were great, the Spads and the Fokkers mixing it. I read all the stories. I didn't like the way the Germans always lost but outside of that it was great.

I liked going over to Frank's place to borrow and return the magazines. His mother wore high heels and had great legs. She sat in a chair with her legs crossed and her skirt pulled high. And Frank's father sat in another chair. His mother and father were always drinking. His father had been a flyer in World War I and had crashed. He had a wire running down inside one of his arms instead of a bone. He got a pension. But he was all right. When we came in he always talked to us.

'How are you doing, boys? How's it going?'

Then we found out about the air show. It was going to be a big one. Frank got hold of a map and we decided to get there by hitch-hiking. I thought we'd probably never make it to the air show but Frank said we would. His father gave us the money.

We went down to the boulevard with our map and we got a ride right away. It was an old guy and his lips were very wet, he kept licking his lips with his tongue and he had on an old checkered shirt which he had buttoned to the throat. He wasn't wearing a necktie. He had strange eyebrows which curled down into his eyes.

'My name's Daniel,' he said.

Frank said, 'This is Henry. And I'm Frank.'

Daniel drove along. Then he took out a Lucky Strike and lit it.

'You boys live at home?'

'Yes,' said Frank.

'Yes,' I said.

Daniel's cigarette was already wet from his mouth. He stopped the car at a signal.

'I was at the beach yesterday and they caught a couple of guys under the pier. The cops caught them and threw them in jail.

One guy was sucking the other guy off. Now what business is that of the cops? It made me mad.'

The signal changed and Daniel pulled away.

'Don't you guys think that was stupid? The cops stopping those guys from sucking-off?'

We didn't answer.

'Well,' said Daniel, 'don't you think a couple of guys have a right to a good blow job?'

'I guess so,' said Frank.

'Yeah,' I said.

'Where are you boys going?' asked Daniel.

'The air show,' said Frank.

'Ah, the air show! I like air shows! I'll tell you what, you boys let me go with you and I'll drive you all the way there.'

We didn't answer.

'Well, how about it?'

'All right,' said Frank.

Frank's father had given us admission and transportation money, but we had decided to save the transportation money by hitch-hiking.

'Maybe you boys would rather go swimming,' said Daniel.

'No,' said Frank, 'we want to see the air show.'

'Swimming's more fun. We can race each other. I know a place where we can be alone. I'd never go under the pier.'

'We want to go to the air show,' said Frank.

'All right,' said Daniel, 'we'll go to the air show.'

When we got to the air show parking lot we got out of the car and while Daniel was locking it Frank said, 'RUN!'

We ran toward the admission gate and Daniel saw us running away.

'HEY, YOU LITTLE PERVERTS! COME BACK HERE! COME BACK!'

We kept running.

'Christ,' said Frank, 'that son-of-a-bitch is crazy!'

We were almost at the admission gate.

'I'LL GET YOU BOYS!'

We paid and ran inside. The show hadn't started yet but a large crowd was already there.

'Let's hide under the grandstand so he can't find us,' said Frank.

The grandstand was built of temporary planks for the people to sit on. We went underneath. We saw two guys standing under the center of the grandstand and looking up. They were about 13 or 14 years old, about two or three years older than we were.

'What are they looking at?' I asked.

'Let's go see,' said Frank.

We walked over. One of the guys saw us coming.

'Hey, you punks, get out of here!'

'What are you guys looking at?' Frank asked.

'I told you punks to get out of here!'

'Ah, hell, Marty, let 'em have a look!'

We walked over to where they were standing. We looked up.

'What is it?' I asked.

'Hell, can't you *see* it?' one of the big guys asked.

'See what?'

'It's a cunt.'

'A cunt? Where?'

'Look, right there! See it?'

He pointed.

There was a woman sitting with her skirt bunched back underneath her. She didn't have any panties on, and looking up between the planks you could see her cunt.

'See it?'

'Yeah, I see it. It's a cunt,' said Frank.

'All right, now you guys get out of here and keep your mouths shut.'

'But we want to look at it a little longer,' said Frank. 'Just let us look a little longer.'

'All right, but not too long.'

We stood there looking up at it.

'I can see it,' I said.

‘It’s a cunt,’ said Frank.

‘It’s really a cunt,’ I said.

‘Yeah,’ said one of the big guys, ‘that’s what it is.’

‘I’ll always remember this,’ I said.

‘All right, you guys, it’s time to go.’

‘What for?’ asked Frank. ‘Why can’t we keep looking?’

‘Because,’ said one of the big guys, ‘I’m going to do something. Now get out of here!’

We walked off.

‘I wonder what he’s going to do?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know,’ said Frank, ‘maybe he’s going to throw a rock at it.’

We got out from under the grandstand and looked around for Daniel. We didn’t see him anywhere.

‘Maybe he left,’ I said.

‘A guy like that doesn’t like airplanes,’ said Frank.

We climbed up into the grandstand and waited for the show to begin. I looked around at all the women.

‘I wonder which one she was?’ I asked.

‘I guess you can’t tell from the top,’ said Frank.

Then the air show began. There was a guy in a Fokker doing stunts. He was good, he looped and circled, stalled, pulled out of it, skimmed the ground, and did an Immelman. His best trick consisted of a hook on each wing. Two red handkerchiefs were fastened to poles about six feet above the ground. The Fokker flew down, dipped a wing, and picked a handkerchief off the pole with the hook on its wing. Then it came around, dipped the other wing, and got the other handkerchief.

Then there were some sky-writing acts which were dull and some balloon races which were silly, and then they had something good – a race around four pylons, close to the ground. The airplanes had to circle the pylons twelve times and the one that finished first got the prize. The pilot was automatically disqualified if he circled above the pylons. The racing planes sat on the ground warming up. They were all built differently. One had a long slim body with hardly any wings. Another was fat and round, it looked like a football. Another was almost all wings and no body. Each was different and each was grandly painted. The prize for the winner was a hundred dollars. They sat there warming up, and you knew you were really going to see something exciting. The motors roared like they wanted to tear away from the airplanes and then the starter dropped the flag and they were off. There were six planes and there was hardly room for them as they went around the pylons. Some of the flyers took them low, others high, some in the middle. Some went faster and lost ground rounding the pylons; others went slower and made sharper turns. It was wonderful and it was terrible. Then one of them lost a wing. The plane bounced along the ground, the engine shooting flame and smoke. It flipped over on its back and the ambulance and the fire truck came running up. The other planes kept going. Then the engine just exploded in another plane, came loose, and the remainder of the plane dropped down like something lost. It hit the ground and everything came apart. But a strange thing happened. The pilot just slid back the cockpit cowling and climbed out and waited for the ambulance. He waved to the crowd and they applauded like mad. It was miraculous.

Suddenly the worst happened. Two planes tangled wings while circling the pylons. They both spun down and crashed and both caught on fire. The ambulance and fire engine ran up again. We saw them pull the two guys out and put them on stretchers. It was sad, those two brave good guys, both probably crippled for life or dead.

That left only two planes, number 5 and number 2, going for the grand prize. Number 5 was the slim plane almost without wings and it was much faster than number 2. Number 2 was the football, he didn't have much speed, but he made up a lot of ground on the turns. It didn't help much. The 5 kept lapping the 2.

'Plane number 5,' said the announcer, 'is now two laps ahead with two laps to go.'

It looked like number 5 was going to get the grand prize. Then he ran into a pylon. Instead of making the turn he just ran into the pylon and knocked the whole thing down. He kept going, straight down the field, lower and lower, the engine at full throttle, and then he hit the ground. The wheels hit and the plane bounced high into the air, flipped over, skidded along the ground. The ambulance and fire engine had a long way to go.

Number 2 just kept circling the three pylons that were left and the one fallen pylon and then he landed. He had won the grand prize. He climbed out. He was a fat guy, just like his airplane. I had expected a handsome tough guy. He had been lucky. Hardly anybody applauded.

To close the show they had a parachute contest. There was a circle painted on the ground, a big bullseye, and the one who landed the closest won. It seemed dull to me. There wasn't much noise or action. The jumpers just bailed out and aimed for the circle.

'This isn't very good,' I told Frank.

'Naw,' he said.

They kept coming down near the circle. More jumpers bailed out of the planes overhead. Then the crowd started oohing and ahhhing.

'Look!' said Frank.

One chute had only partially opened. There wasn't much air in it. He was falling faster than the others. You could see him kicking his legs and working his arms, trying to untangle the parachute.

'Jesus Christ,' said Frank.

The guy kept dropping, lower and lower, you could see him better and better. He kept yanking at the cords trying to untangle the chute but nothing worked. He hit the ground, bounced just a bit, then fell back and was still. The half-filled chute came down over him.

They cancelled the remainder of the jumps.

We walked out with the people, still watching out for Daniel.

'Let's not hitch-hike back,' I said to Frank.

‘All right,’ he said.

Walking out with the people, I didn’t know which was more exciting, the air race, the parachute jump that failed, or the cunt.

19

The 5th grade was a little better. The other students seemed less hostile and I was growing larger physically. I still wasn't chosen for the homeroom teams but I was threatened less. David and his violin had gone away. The family had moved. I walked home alone. I was often trailed by one or two guys, of whom Juan was the worst, but they didn't start anything. Juan smoked cigarettes. He'd walk behind me smoking a cigarette and he always had a different buddy with him. He never followed me alone. It scared me. I wished they'd go away. Yet, in another way, I didn't care. I didn't like Juan. I didn't like anybody in that school. I think they knew that. I think that's why they disliked me. I didn't like the way they walked or looked or talked, but I didn't like my father or mother either. I still had the feeling of being surrounded by white empty space. There was always a slight nausea in my stomach. Juan was dark-skinned and he wore a brass chain instead of a belt. The girls were afraid of him, and the boys too. He and one of his buddies followed me home almost every day. I'd walk into the house and they'd stand outside. Juan would smoke his cigarette, looking tough, and his buddy would stand there. I'd watch them through the curtain. Finally, they would walk off.

Mrs Fretag was our English teacher. The first day in class she asked us each our names.

'I want to get to know all of you,' she said.

She smiled.

'Now, each of you has a father, I'm sure. I think it would be interesting if we found out what each of your fathers does for a living. We'll start with seat number one and we will go around the class. Now, Marie, what does your father do for a living?'

'He's a gardener.'

'Ah, that's nice! Seat number two … Andrew, what does your father do?'

It was terrible. All the fathers in my immediate neighborhood had lost their jobs. My father had lost his job. Gene's father sat on his front porch all day. All the fathers were without jobs except Chuck's who worked in a meat plant. He drove a red car with the meat company's name on the side.

'My father is a fireman,' said seat number two.

'Ah, that's interesting,' said Mrs Fretag. 'Seat number three.'

'My father is a lawyer.'

'Seat number four.'

'My father is a … policeman …'

What was I going to say? Maybe only the fathers in my neighborhood were without jobs. I'd heard of the stock market crash. It meant something bad. Maybe the stock market had only crashed in our neighborhood.

'Seat number eighteen.'

'My father is a movie actor …'

'Nineteen …'

'My father is a concert violinist …'

'Twenty …'

'My father works in the circus …'

'Twenty-one …'

'My father is a bus driver …'

'Twenty-two …'

'My father sings in the opera …'

'Twenty-three …'

Twenty-three. That was me.

'My father is a dentist,' I said.

Mrs Fretag went right on through the class until she reached number thirty-three.

'My father doesn't have a job,' said number thirty-three.

Shit, I thought, I wish I had thought of that.

One day Mrs Fretag gave us an assignment.

'Our distinguished President, President Herbert Hoover, is going to visit Los Angeles this Saturday to speak. I want all of you to go hear our President. And I want you to write an essay about the experience and about what you think of President Hoover's speech.'

Saturday? There was no way I could go. I had to mow the lawn. I had to get the hairs. (I could never get all the hairs.) Almost every Saturday I got a beating with the razor strop because my father found a hair. (I also got stropped during the week, once or twice, for other things I failed to do or didn't do right.) There was no way I could tell my father that I had to go see President Hoover.

So, I didn't go. That Sunday I took some paper and sat down to write about how I had seen the President. His open car, trailing flowing streamers, had entered the football stadium. One car, full of secret service agents went ahead and two cars followed close behind. The agents were brave men with guns to protect our President. The crowd rose as the President's car entered the arena. There had never been anything like it before. It was the President. It was him. He waved. We cheered. A band played. Seagulls circled overhead as if they too knew it was the President. And there were skywriting airplanes too. They wrote words in the sky like 'Prosperity is just around the corner.' The President stood up in his car, and just as he did the clouds parted and the light from the sun fell across his face. It was almost as if God knew too. Then the cars stopped and our great President, surrounded by secret service agents, walked to the speaker's platform. As he stood behind the microphone a bird flew down from the sky and landed on the speaker's platform near him. The President waved to the bird and laughed and we all laughed with him. Then he began to speak and the people listened. I couldn't quite hear the speech because I was sitting too near a popcorn machine which made a lot of noise popping the kernels, but I think I heard him say that the problems in Manchuria were not serious, and that at home everything was going to be all right, we shouldn't worry, all we had to do was to believe in America. There would be enough jobs for everybody. There would be enough dentists with enough teeth to pull, enough fires and enough firemen to put them out. Mills and factories would open again. Our friends in South America would pay their debts. Soon we would all sleep peacefully, our stomachs and our hearts full. God and our great country would surround us with love and protect us from evil, from the socialists, awaken us from our national nightmare, forever …

The President listened to the applause, waved, then went back to his car, got in, and was driven off followed by carloads of secret service agents as the sun began to sink, the afternoon turning into evening, red and gold and wonderful. We had seen and heard President Herbert Hoover.

I turned in my essay on Monday. On Tuesday Mrs Fretag faced the class.

'I've read all your essays about our distinguished President's visit to Los Angeles. I was there. Some of you, I noticed, could not attend for one reason or another. For those of you who could not attend, I would like to read this essay by Henry Chinaski.'

The class was terribly silent. I was the most unpopular member of the class by far. It was like a knife slicing through all their hearts.

'This is very creative,' said Mrs Fretag, and she began to read my essay. The words sounded good to me. Everybody was listening. My words filled the room, from blackboard to blackboard, they hit the ceiling and bounced off, they covered Mrs Fretag's shoes and piled up on the floor. Some of the prettiest girls in the class began to sneak glances at me. All the tough guys were pissed. Their essays hadn't been worth shit. I drank in my words like a thirsty man. I even began to believe them. I saw Juan sitting there like I'd punched him in the face. I stretched out my legs and leaned back. All too soon it was over.

'Upon this grand note,' said Mrs Fretag, 'I hereby dismiss the class …'

They got up and began packing out.

'Not you, Henry,' said Mrs Fretag.

I sat in my chair and Mrs Fretag stood there looking at me.

Then she said, 'Henry, were you there?'

I sat there trying to think of an answer. I couldn’t. I said, ‘No, I wasn’t there.’

She smiled. ‘That makes it all the more remarkable.’

‘Yes, ma’am …’

‘You can leave, Henry.’

I got up and walked out. I began my walk home. So, that’s what they wanted: lies. Beautiful lies. That’s what they needed. People were fools. It was going to be easy for me. I looked around. Juan and his buddy were not following me. Things were looking up.

20

There were times when Frank and I were friendly with Chuck, Eddie and Gene. But something would always happen (usually I caused it) and then I would be out, and Frank would be partly out because he was my friend. It was good hanging out with Frank. We hitch-hiked everywhere. One of our favorite places was this movie studio. We crawled under a fence surrounded by tall weeds to get in. We saw the huge wall and steps they used in the King Kong movie. We saw the fake streets and the fake buildings. The buildings were just fronts with nothing behind them. We walked all over that movie lot many times until the guard would chase us out. We hitch-hiked down to the beach to the Fun House. We would stay in the Fun House three or four hours. We memorized that place. It really wasn't that good. People shit and pissed in there and the place was littered with empty bottles. And there were rubbers in the crapper, hardened and wrinkled. Bums slept in the Fun House after it closed. There really wasn't anything funny about the Fun House. The House of Mirrors was good at first. We stayed in there until we had memorized how to walk through the maze of mirrors and then it wasn't any good any more. Frank and I never got into fights. We were curious about things. There was a movie featuring a Caesarean operation on the pier and we went in and saw it. It was bloody. Each time they cut into the woman blood squirted out, gushers of it, and then they pulled out the baby. We went fishing off the pier and when we caught something we would sell it to the old Jewish ladies who sat on the benches. I got some beatings from my father for running off with Frank but I figured I was going to get the beatings anyhow so I might as well have the fun.

But I continued to have trouble with the other kids in the neighborhood. My father didn't help. For example he bought me an Indian suit and a bow and arrow when all the other kids had cowboy outfits. It was the same then as in the schoolyard – I was ganged-up on. They'd circle me with their cowboy outfits and their guns, but when it got bad I'd just put an arrow into the bow, pull it back and wait. That always moved them off. I never wore that Indian suit unless my father made me put it on.

I kept falling out with Chuck, Eddie and Gene and then we'd get back together and then we'd fall out all over again.

One afternoon I was just standing around. I wasn't exactly in good or in bad with the gang, I was just waiting around for them to forget the last thing I had done that had made them angry. There wasn't anything else to do. Just white air and waiting. I got tired of standing around and decided to walk up the hill to Washington Boulevard, east to the movie house and then back down to West Adams Boulevard. Maybe I'd walk past the church. I started walking. Then I heard Eddie:

'Hey, Henry, come here!'

The guys were standing in a driveway between two houses. Eddie, Frank, Chuck and Gene. They were watching something. They were bent over a large bush watching something.

'Come here, Henry!'

'What is it?'

I walked up to where they were bending over.

'It's a spider getting ready to eat a fly!' said Eddie.

I looked. The spider had spun a web between the branches of a bush and a fly had gotten caught in there. The spider was very excited. The fly shook the whole web as it tried to pull free. It was buzzing wildly and helplessly as the spider wound the fly's wings and body in more and more spider web. The spider went around and around, webbing the fly completely as it buzzed. The spider was very big and ugly.

'It's going to close in now!' yelled Chuck. 'It's going to sink its fangs!'

I pushed in between the guys, kicked out and knocked the spider and the fly out of the web with my foot.

'What the hell have you done?' asked Chuck.

'You son-of-a-bitch!' yelled Eddie. 'You've *spoiled* it!'

I backed off. Even Frank stared at me strangely.

'Let's get his ass!' yelled Gene.

They were between me and the street. I ran down the driveway into the backyard of a strange house. They were after me. I ran through the backyard and behind the garage. There was a six-foot lattice fence covered with vines. I went straight up the fence and over the top. I ran through the next backyard and up the driveway and as I ran up the driveway I looked back and saw Chuck just reaching the top of the fence. Then he slipped and fell into the yard landing on his back. 'Shit!' he said. I took a right and kept running. I ran for seven or eight blocks and then sat down on somebody's lawn and rested. There was nobody around. I wondered if Frank would forgive me. I wondered if the others would forgive me. I decided to stay out of sight for a week or so …

And so they forgot. Not much happened for a while. There were many days of nothing. Then Frank's father committed suicide. Nobody knew why. Frank told me he and his mother would have to move to a smaller place in another neighborhood. He said he would write. And he did. Only we didn't write. We drew cartoons. About cannibals. His cartoons were about troubles with cannibals and then I'd continue the cartoon story where his left off, about the troubles with the cannibals. My mother found one of Frank's cartoons and showed it to my father and our letter writing was over.

5th grade became 6th grade and I began to think about running away from home but I decided that if most of our fathers couldn't get jobs how in the hell could a guy under five feet tall get one? John Dillinger was everybody's hero, adults and kids alike. He took the money from the banks. And there was Pretty Boy Floyd and Ma Barker and Machine Gun Kelly.

People began going to vacant lots where weeds grew. They had learned that some of the weeds could be cooked and eaten. There were fist fights between men in the vacant lots and on street corners. Everybody was angry. The men smoked Bull Durham and didn't take any shit from anybody. They let the little round Bull Durham tags hang out of their front shirt pockets and they could all roll a cigarette with one hand. When you saw a man with a Bull Durham tag dangling, that meant look out. People went around talking about 2nd and 3rd mortgages. My father came home one night with a broken arm and two black eyes. My mother had a low-paying job somewhere. And each boy in the neighborhood had one pair of Sunday pants and one pair of daily pants. When shoes wore out there weren't any new ones. The department stores had soles and heels they sold for 15 or 20 cents along with the glue, and these were glued to the bottoms of the worn-out shoes. Gene's parents had one rooster and some chickens in their backyard, and if some chicken didn't lay enough eggs they ate it.

As for me, it was the same – at school, and with Chuck, Gene and Eddie. Not only did the grown-ups get mean, the kids got mean, and even the animals got mean. It was like they took their cue from the people.

One day I was standing around, waiting as usual, not friendly with the gang, no longer really wanting to be, when Gene rushed up to me, 'Hey, Henry, come on!'

'What is it?'

'COME ON!'

Gene started running and I ran after him. We ran down the driveway and into the Gibsons' backyard. The Gibsons had a large brick wall all around their backyard.

'LOOK! HE'S GOT THE CAT CORNERED! HE'S GOING TO KILL IT!'

There was a small white cat backed into a corner of the wall. It couldn't go up and it couldn't go in one direction or the other. Its back was arched and it was spitting, its claws ready. But it was very small and Chuck's bulldog, Barney, was growling and moving closer and closer. I got the feeling that the cat had been put there by the guys and then the bulldog had been brought in. I felt it strongly because of the way Chuck and Eddie and Gene were watching: they had a guilty look.

'You guys did this,' I said.

'No,' said Chuck, 'it's the cat's fault. It came in here. Let it fight its way out.'

'I hate you bastards,' I said.

'Barney's going to kill that cat,' said Gene.

'Barney will rip it to pieces,' said Eddie. 'He's afraid of the claws but when he moves in it will be all over.'

Barney was a large brown bulldog with slobbering jaws. He was dumb and fat with senseless brown eyes. His growl was steady and he kept inching forward, the hairs standing up on his neck and along his back. I felt like kicking him in his stupid ass but I figured he would rip my leg off. He was entirely intent upon the kill. The white cat wasn't even fully grown. It hissed and waited, pressed against the wall, a beautiful creature, so clean.

The dog moved slowly forward. Why did the guys need this? This wasn't a matter of courage, it was just dirty play. Where were the grown-ups? Where were the authorities? They were always around accusing me. Now where were they?

I thought of rushing in, grabbing the cat and running, but I didn't have the nerve. I was afraid that the bulldog would attack me. The knowledge that I didn't have the courage to do what was necessary made me feel terrible. I began to feel physically sick. I was weak. I didn't want it to happen yet I couldn't think of any way to stop it.

'Chuck,' I said, 'let the cat go, please. Call your dog off.'

Chuck didn't answer. He just kept watching.

Then he said, 'Barney, go get him! *Get* that cat!'

Barney moved forward and suddenly the cat leaped. It was a furious blur of white and hissing, claws and teeth. Barney backed off and the cat retreated to the wall again.

'Go get him, Barney,' Chuck said again.

'God damn you, shut up!' I told him.

'Don't talk to me that way,' Chuck said.

Barney began to move in again.

'You guys set this up,' I said.

I heard a slight sound behind us and looked around. I saw old Mr Gibson watching from behind his bedroom window. He wanted the cat to get killed too, just like the guys. Why?

Old Mr Gibson was our mailman with the false teeth. He had a wife who stayed in the house all the time. She only came out to empty the garbage. Mrs Gibson always wore a net over her hair and she was always dressed in a nightgown, bathrobe and slippers.

Then as I watched, Mrs Gibson, dressed as always, came and stood next to her husband, waiting for the kill. Old Mr Gibson was one of the few men in the neighborhood with a job but he still needed to see the cat killed. Gibson was just like Chuck, Eddie and Gene.

There were too many of them.

The bulldog moved closer. I couldn't watch the kill. I felt a great shame at leaving the cat like that. There was always the chance that the cat might try to escape, but I knew that they would prevent it. That cat wasn't only facing the bulldog, it was facing Humanity.

I turned and walked away, out of the yard, up the driveway and to the sidewalk. I walked along the sidewalk toward where I lived and there in the front yard of his home, my father stood waiting.

'Where have you been?' he asked.

I didn't answer.

'Get inside,' he said, 'and stop looking so unhappy or I'll give you something that will *really* make you unhappy!'

21

Then I started attending Mt Justin Jr High. About half the guys from Delsey Grammar School went there, the biggest and toughest half. Another gang of giants came from other schools. Our 7th-grade class was bigger than the 9th-grade class. When we lined up for gym it was funny, most of us were bigger than the gym teachers. We would stand there for roll-call, slouched, our guts hanging out, heads down, shoulders slumped.

'Jesus Christ,' said Wagner, the gym teacher, 'pull your shoulders back, stand straight!'

Nobody would change position. We were the way we were, and we didn't want to be anything else. We all came from Depression families and most of us were ill-fed, yet we had grown up to be huge and strong. Most of us, I think, got little love from our families, and we didn't ask for love or kindness from anybody. We were a joke but people were careful not to laugh in front of us. It was as if we had grown up too soon and we were bored with being children. We had no respect for our elders. We were like tigers with the mange. One of the Jewish fellows, Sam Feldman, had a black beard and had to shave every morning. By noon his chin was almost black. And he had a mass of black hair all over his chest and he smelled terrible under the arms. Another guy looked like Jack Dempsey. Another guy, Peter Mangalore, had a cock 10 inches long, soft. And when we got in the shower, I found out I had the biggest balls of anybody.

'*Hey! Look at that guy's balls, will ya?*'

'*Holy shit! Not much cock but look at those balls!*'

'*Holy shit!*'

I don't know what it was about us but we had something, and we felt it. You could see it in the way we walked and talked. We didn't talk much, we just *inferred*, and that's what got everybody mad, the way we took things for granted.

The 7th-grade team would play touch football after school against the 8th and 9th graders. It was no match. We beat them easy, we knocked them down, we did it with style, almost without effort. In touch football most teams passed on every play, but our team worked in lots of runs. Then we could set up the blocking and our guys would go for the other guys and knock them down. It was just an excuse to be violent, we didn't give a damn about the runner. The other side was always glad when we called a pass-play.

The girls stayed after school and watched us. Some of them were already going out with high-school guys, they didn't want to mess with jr-high-school punks, but they stayed to watch the 7th graders. We were known. The girls stayed after class and watched us and marveled. I wasn't on the team but I stood on the sidelines and sneaked smokes, feeling like a coach or something. We're all going to get fucked, we thought, watching the girls. But most of us only masturbated.

Masturbation. I remember how I learned about it. One morning Eddie scratched on my bedroom window.

'What is it?' I asked Eddie.

He held up a test tube and it had something white in the bottom of it.

'What's that?'

'Come,' said Eddie, 'it's my come.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah, all you do is spit on your hand and begin rubbing your cock, it feels good and pretty soon this white juice shoots out of the end of your cock. That stuff is called "come."'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah.'

Eddie walked off with his test tube. I thought about it a while and then I decided to try it. My cock got hard and it felt real good, it felt better and better, and I kept going and it felt like nothing I had ever felt before. Then juice spurted out of the head of my cock. After that I did it every now and then. It got better if you imagined you were doing it with a girl while you whacked-off.

One day I was standing on the sidelines watching our team kick the shit out of some other team. I was sneaking a smoke and watching. There was a girl on either side of me. As our guys broke out of a huddle I saw the gym coach, Curly Wagner, walking toward me. I ditched the smoke and clapped my hands.

'Let's dump 'em on their butts, gang!'

Wagner walked up to me. He just stood there staring at me. I had developed an evil look on my face.

'I'm going to get *all* you guys!' Wagner said. 'Especially you!'

I turned my head and glanced at him, casually, then turned my head away. Wagner stood there looking at me. Then he walked off.

I felt good about that. I liked being picked out as one of the bad guys. I liked to feel bad. Anybody could be a good guy, that didn't take guts. Dillinger had guts. Ma Barker was a great woman teaching those guys how to operate a submachine gun. I didn't want to be like my father. He only pretended to be bad. When you're bad you didn't pretend, it was just there. I liked being bad. Trying to be good made me sick.

The girl next to me said, 'You don't have to take that from Wagner. Are you afraid of him?'

I turned and looked at her. I stared at her a long time, motionless.

'What's wrong with you?' she asked.

I looked away from her, spit on the ground, and walked off. I slowly walked the length of the field, exited through the rear gate and began walking home.

Wagner always wore a grey sweatshirt and grey sweatpants. He had a little pot belly. Something was continually bothering him. His only advantage was his age. He would try to bluff us but that was working less and less. There was always somebody pushing me who had no right to push. Wagner and my father. My father and Wagner. What did they want? Why was I in their way?

22

One day, just like in grammar school, like with David, a boy attached himself to me. He was small and thin and had almost no hair on top of his head. The guys called him Baldy. His real name was Eli LaCrosse. I liked his real name, but I didn't like him. He just glued himself to me. He was so pitiful that I couldn't tell him to get lost. He was like a mongrel dog, starved and kicked. Yet it didn't make me feel good going around with him. But since I knew that mongrel-dog feeling, I let him hang around. He used a cuss word in almost every sentence, at least one cuss word, but it was all fake, he wasn't tough, he was scared. I wasn't scared but I was confused so maybe we were a good pair.

I walked him back to his place after school every day. He was living with his mother, his father and his grandfather. They had a little house across from a small park. I liked the area, it had great shade trees, and since some people had told me that I was ugly, I always preferred shade to the sun, darkness to light.

During our walks home Baldy had told me about his father. He had been a doctor, a successful surgeon, but he had lost his license because he was a drunk. One day I met Baldy's father. He was sitting in a chair under a tree, just sitting there.

'Dad,' he said, 'this is Henry.'

'Hello, Henry.'

It reminded me of when I had seen my grandfather for the first time, standing on the steps of his house. Only Baldy's father had black hair and a black beard, but his eyes were the same – brilliant and glowing, so strange. And here was Baldy, the son, and he didn't glow at all.

'Come on,' Baldy said, 'follow me.'

We went down into a cellar, under the house. It was dark and damp and we stood a while until our eyes grew used to the gloom. Then I could see a number of barrels.

'These barrels are full of different kinds of wine,' Baldy said. 'Each barrel has a spigot. Want to try some?'

'No.'

'Go ahead, just try a god-damned sip.'

'What for?'

'You think you're a god-damned man or what?'

'I'm tough,' I said.

'Then take a fucking sample.'

Here was little Baldy, daring me. No problem. I walked up to a barrel, ducked my head down.

'Turn the god-damned spigot! Open your god-damned mouth!'

'Are there any spiders around here?'

'Go on! Go on, god damn it!'

I put my mouth under the spigot and opened it. A smelly liquid trickled out and into my mouth. I spit it out.

'Don't be chicken! Swallow it, what the shit!'

I opened the spigot and I opened my mouth. The smelly liquid entered and I swallowed it. I turned off the spigot and stood there. I thought I was going to puke.

'Now, you drink some,' I said to Baldy.

'Sure,' he said, 'I ain't fucking afraid!'

He got down under a barrel and took a good swallow. A little punk like that wasn't going to outdo me. I got under another barrel, opened it and took a swallow. I stood up. I was beginning to feel good.

'Hey, Baldy,' I said, 'I like this stuff.'

'Well, shit, try some more.'

I tried some more. It was tasting better. I was feeling better.

'This stuff belongs to your father, Baldy. I shouldn't drink it all.'

'He doesn't care. He's stopped drinking.'

Never had I felt so good. It was better than masturbating.

I went from barrel to barrel. It was magic. Why hadn't someone told me? With this, life was great, a man was perfect, nothing could touch him.

I stood up straight and looked at Baldy.

'Where's your mother? I'm going to fuck your mother!'

‘I’ll kill you, you bastard, you stay away from my mother!’

‘You know I can whip you, Baldy.’

‘Yes.’

‘All right, I’ll leave your mother alone.’

‘Let’s go then, Henry.’

‘One more drink …’

I went to a barrel and took a long one. Then we went up the cellar stairway. When we were out, Baldy’s father was still sitting in his chair.

‘You boys been in the wine cellar, eh?’

‘Yes,’ said Baldy.

‘Starting a little early, aren’t you?’

We didn’t answer. We walked over to the boulevard and Baldy and I went into a store which sold chewing gum. We bought several packs of it and stuck it into our mouths. He was worried about his mother finding out. I wasn’t worried about anything. We sat on a park bench and chewed the gum and I thought, well, now I have found something, I have found something that is going to help me, for a long long time to come. The park grass looked greener, the park benches looked better and the flowers were trying harder. Maybe that stuff wasn’t good for surgeons but anybody who wanted to be a surgeon, there was something wrong with them in the first place.

23

At Mt Justin, biology class was neat. We had Mr Stanhope for our teacher. He was an old guy about 55 and we pretty much dominated him. Lilly Fischman was in the class and she was really developed. Her breasts were enormous and she had a marvelous behind which she wiggled while walking in her high-heeled shoes. She was great, she talked to all the guys and rubbed up against them while she talked.

Every day in biology class it was the same. We never learned any biology. Mr Stanhope would talk for about ten minutes and then Lilly would say, ‘Oh, Mr *Stanhope*, let’s have a *show!*’

‘No!’

‘Oh, Mr *Stanhope!*’

She would walk up to his desk, bend over him sweetly and whisper something.

‘Oh, well, all right …’ he’d say.

And then Lilly would begin singing and wiggling. She always opened up with ‘The Lullaby of Broadway’ and then she went into her other numbers. She was great, she was hot, she was burning up, and we were too. She was like a grown woman, putting it to Stanhope, putting it to us. It was wonderful. Old Stanhope would sit there blubbering and slobbering. We’d laugh at Stanhope and cheer Lilly on. It lasted until one day the principal, Mr Lacefield, came running in.

‘What’s going on here?’

Stanhope just sat there unable to speak.

‘This class is dismissed!’ Lacefield screamed.

As we filed out, Lacefield said, ‘And *you*, Miss Fischman, will report to my office!’

Of course, after that we never studied our homework, and that was all right until the day Mr Stanhope gave us our first examination.

‘Shit,’ said Peter Mangalore out loud, ‘what are we going to do?’

Peter was the guy with the 10-incher, soft.

'You'll never have to work for a living,' said the guy who looked like Jack Dempsey. 'This is our problem.'

'Maybe we ought to burn the school down,' said Red Kirkpatrick.

'Shit,' said a guy from the back of the room, 'every time I get an "F" my father pulls out one of my fingernails.'

We all looked at our examination sheets. I thought about *my* father. Then I thought about Lilly Fischman. Lilly Fischman, I thought, you are a whore, an evil woman, wiggling your body in front of us and singing like that, you will send us all to hell.

Stanhope was watching us.

'Why isn't anybody writing? Why isn't anybody answering the questions? Does everybody have a pencil?'

'Yeah, yeah, we all got pencils,' one of the guys said.

Lilly sat up in front, right by Mr Stanhope's desk. We saw her open her biology textbook and look up the answer to the first question. That was it. We all opened up our textbooks. Stanhope just sat there and watched us. He didn't know what to do. He began to sputter. He sat there a good five minutes, then he jumped up. He ran back and forth up and down the center aisle of the room.

'What are you people doing? Close those textbooks! Close those textbooks!'

As he ran by, the students would close their books only to open them again when he had run past.

Baldy was in the seat next to mine, laughing. 'He's an *asshole!* Oh, what an old *asshole!*'

I felt a little sorry for Stanhope but it was either him or me. Stanhope stood behind his desk and screamed, '*All textbooks must be closed or I will flunk the entire class!*'

Then Lilly Fischman stood up. She pulled her skirt up and yanked at one of her silk stockings. She adjusted the garter, we saw white flesh. Then she pulled at and adjusted the other stocking. Such a sight we had never seen, nor had Stanhope ever seen anything like it. Lilly sat down and we all finished the exam with our textbooks open. Stanhope sat behind his desk, utterly defeated.

Another guy we jerked around was Pop Farnsworth. It began the first day in Machine Shop. He said, ‘Here we learn by doing. We will begin right now. You will each take an engine apart and put it back together, until it is in working order, during the semester. There are charts on the wall and I will answer your questions. You will also be shown movies about how an engine works. But right now please begin to dismantle your engines. The tools are on your workshelf.’

‘Hey, Pop, how about the movies first?’ some guy asked.

‘I said, “Begin your project!”’

I don’t know where they got all those engines. They were greasy and black and rusted. They looked really dismal.

‘Fuck,’ said some guy, ‘this one is a hunk of clogged shit.’

We stood over our engines. Most of the guys reached for monkey wrenches. Red Kirkpatrick took a screwdriver and scraped it slowly along the top of his engine carefully creating a black ribbon of grease two feet long.

‘Come on, Pop, how about a movie? We just got out of gym, our asses are dragging! Wagner had us doing the hop, skip and jump like a bunch of frogs!’

‘Begin your assignment as requested!’

We started in. It was senseless. It was worse than Music

Appreciation. Some clanking of tools could be heard and some heavy breathing.

‘FUCK!’ hollered Harry Henderson, ‘I’VE JUST SKINNED MY WHOLE GOD-DAMNED KNUCKLE! THIS IS NOTHING BUT FUCKING WHITE SLAVERY!’

He wrapped a handkerchief tenderly around his right hand and watched the blood soak through. ‘*Shit*,’ he said.

The rest of us kept trying. ‘I’d rather stick my head up an elephant’s cunt,’ said Red Kirkpatrick.

Jack Dempsey threw his wrench to the floor. ‘I quit,’ he said, ‘do anything you want to me, I quit. Kill me. Cut my balls off. I quit.’

He walked over and leaned against a wall. He folded his arms and looked down at his shoes.

The situation seemed truly terrible. There weren't any girls. When you looked out the back door of the shop you could see the open schoolyard, all that sunlight and empty space out there where there was nothing to do. And here we were bent over stupid engines that weren't even attached to cars, they were useless. Just stupid steel. It was dumb and it was hard. We needed mercy. Our lives were dumb enough. Something had to save us. We'd heard Pop was a soft touch but it didn't seem true. He was a giant son-of-a-bitch with a beer gut, dressed in his greasy outfit, and with hair hanging down in his eyes and grease on his chin.

Arnie Whitechapel threw down his wrench and walked up to Mr Farnsworth. Arnie had a big grin on his face. 'Hey, Pop, what the fuck?'

'Get back to your engine, Whitechapel!'

'Ah, come on, Pop, what the shit!'

Arnie was a couple of years older than the rest of us. He had spent a few years in some boys' correctional school. But even though he was older than we were, he was smaller. He had very black hair slicked back with vaseline. He would stand in front of the mirror in the men's crapper squeezing his pimples. He talked dirty to the girls and carried Sheik rubbers in his pockets.

'I got a good one for you, Pop!'

'Yeah? Get back to your engine, Whitechapel.'

'It's a good one, Pop.'

We stood there and watched as Arnie began to tell Pop a dirty joke. Their heads were close together. Then the joke was over. Pop began laughing. That big body was doubled over, he was holding his gut. 'Holy shit! Oh my god, holy shit!' he laughed. Then he stopped. 'OK, Arnie, back to your machine!'

'No, wait, Pop, I got another one!'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah, listen …'

We all left our machines and walked over. We circled them, listening as Arnie told the next joke. When it was over Pop doubled up. ‘Holy shit, oh lord, holy shit!’

‘Then there’s another one, Pop. This guy is driving his car in the desert. He notices this guy jumping along the road. He’s naked and his hands and feet are tied with rope. The guy stops his car and asks the guy, “Hey, buddy, what’s the matter?” And the guy tells him, “Well, I was driving along and I saw this bastard hitch-hiking so I stopped and the son-of-a-bitch pulls a gun on me, takes my clothes away and then ties me up. Then the dirty son-of-a-bitch reams me in the ass!” “Oh yeah?” says the guy getting out of his car. “Yeah, that’s what that dirty son-of-a-bitch did!” says the man. “Well,” says the guy unzipping his fly, “I guess this just isn’t your lucky day!”’

Pop began laughing, he doubled over. ‘Oh, no! Oh, NO! OH … HOLY … SHIT, CHRIST … HOLY SHIT …!’

He finally stopped.

‘God damn,’ he said quietly, ‘oh my lord …’

‘How about a movie, Pop?’

‘Oh well, all right.’

Somebody closed the back door and Pop pulled out a dirty white screen. He started the projector. It was a lousy movie but it beat working on those engines. The gas was ignited by the spark plugs and the explosion hit the cylinder head and the head was thrust down and that turned the crankshaft and the valves opened and closed and the cylinder heads kept going up and down and the crankshaft turned some more. Not very interesting, but it was cool in there and you could lean back in your chair and think about what you wanted to think about. You didn’t have to bust your knuckles on dumb steel.

We never did get those engines taken apart let alone put back together again and I don’t know how many times we saw that same movie. Whitechapel’s jokes kept coming and we all laughed our heads off even though most of the jokes were pretty terrible, except to Pop Farnsworth who kept doubling over and laughing, ‘Holy shit! Oh, no! Oh, no, no, no!’

He was an OK guy. We all liked him.

24

Our English teacher, Miss Gredis, was the absolute best. She was a blonde with a long sharp nose. Her nose wasn’t much good but you didn’t notice it when you looked at the rest of her. She wore tight dresses and low v-necks, black high-heeled shoes and silk stockings. She was snake-like with long beautiful legs. She only sat behind her desk when she took roll-call. She kept one desk vacant at the front of the room and after roll-call she would come down and sit on that desk top, facing us. Miss Gredis sat perched there with her legs crossed and her skirt pulled high. Never had we seen such ankles, such legs, such thighs. Well, there was Lilly Fischman, but Lilly was a girl-woman while Miss Gredis was in full bloom. And we got to gaze upon her for a full hour each day. There wasn’t a boy in that class who wasn’t sad when the bell rang ending the English period. We’d talk about her.

‘Do you think she wants to be fucked?’

‘No, I think she’s just teasing us. She knows she’s driving us crazy, that’s all she needs, that’s all she wants.’

‘I know where she lives. I’m going over there some night.’

‘You wouldn’t have the balls!’

‘Yeah? Yeah? I’ll fuck the shit out of her! She’s asking for it!’

‘A guy I know in the 8th grade said he went over there one night.’

‘Yeah? What happened?’

‘She came to the door in a nightgown, her tits were practically hanging out. The guy said he had forgotten the next day’s homework and wondered what it was. She asked him in.’

‘No shit?’

‘Yeah. Nothing happened. She made him some tea, told him about the homework and he left.’

‘If I had of gotten in, *that* would have been *it!*’

‘Yeah? What would you have done?’

‘First I would have corn-holed her, then I would have eaten her pussy, then I would fuck her between the tits and then I would force her to give me a blow job.’

‘No kidding, dreamer boy. You ever been laid?’

‘Fuck yes, I’ve been laid. Several times.’

‘How was it?’

‘Lousy.’

‘Couldn’t come, huh?’

‘I came all over the place, I thought I’d never stop.’

‘Came all over the palm of your hand, huh?’

‘Ha, ha, ha, ha!’

‘Ah, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!’

‘Ha, ha!’

‘All over your hand, huh?’

‘Fuck you guys!’

‘I don’t think any of us has been laid,’ said one of the guys. There was silence.

‘That’s shit. I was laid when I was seven years old.’

‘That’s nothing. I was laid when I was four.’

‘Sure, Red. Lay it on good!’

‘I got this little girl under the house.’

‘You got a hard?’

‘Sure.’

‘You came?’

‘I think so. Something squirted out.’

‘Sure. You pissed in her cunt, Red.’

‘Balls!’

‘What was her name?’

‘Betty Ann.’

‘Fuck,’ said the guy who claimed to have gotten laid when he was seven. ‘Mine was named Betty Ann too.’

‘That whore,’ said Red.

One fine Spring day we were sitting in English class and Miss Gredis was sitting on the front desk facing us. She had her skirt pulled especially high, it was terrifying, beautiful, wondrous and dirty. Such legs, such thighs, we were very close to the magic. It was unbelievable. Baldy sat in the seat across the aisle from me. He reached over and began poking me on the leg with his finger: '*She's breaking all the records!*' he whispered. '*Look! Look!*'

'My God,' I said, 'shut up or she'll pull her skirt down!'

Baldy pulled his hand back and I waited. We hadn't spooked Miss Gredis. Her skirt remained as high as ever. It was truly a day to remember. There wasn't a boy in class without a hard-on and Miss Gredis went on talking. I'm sure that none of the boys heard a word she was saying. The girls, though, turned and glanced at each other as if to say, this bitch is going too far. Miss Gredis couldn't go too far. It was almost as if there weren't even a cunt up there but something much better. Those legs. The sun came through the window and poured in on those legs and thighs, the sun played on that warm silk pulled so tightly. The skirt was so *high*, pulled back, we all prayed for a glimpse of panty, a glimpse of *something*, Jesus Christ, it was like the world ending and beginning and ending again, it was everything real and unreal, the sun, the thighs, and the silk, so smooth, so warm, so alluring. The whole room throbbed. Eyesight blurred and returned and Miss Gredis went on sitting there as if nothing was happening and she kept talking as if everything was normal. That's what made it so good and so terrible: the fact that she pretended that it wasn't happening. I looked down at my desk top for a moment and saw the grain in the wood heightened as if each pattern was a pool of whirling liquid. Then I quickly looked back at the legs and thighs, angered with myself that I had looked away for a moment, and perhaps missed something.

Then the sound began: '*Thump, thump, thump, thump …*'

Richard Waite. He sat in a seat in the back. He had huge ears and thick lips, the lips were swollen and monstrous and he had a very large head. His eyes were almost without color, they didn't reflect interest or intelligence. He had large feet and his mouth always hung open. When he spoke the words came out one by one, halting, with long pauses in between. He wasn't even a sissy. Nobody ever spoke to him. Nobody knew what he was doing there in our school. He gave the impression that something important was missing from his makeup. He wore clean clothing, but his shirt was always out in the back, one or two buttons were gone on his shirt or on his pants. Richard Waite. He lived somewhere and he came to school every day.

'*Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump …*'

Richard Waite was jerking-off, a salute to Miss Gredis' thighs and legs. He had finally weakened. Perhaps he didn't understand society's ways. Now we all heard him. Miss Gredis heard him. The girls heard him. We all knew what he was doing. He was so fucking dumb he didn't even have sense enough to keep it quiet. And he was becoming more and more excited. The thumps grew louder. His closed fist was hitting the underside of his desk top.

'THUMP, THUMP THUMP …'

We looked at Miss Gredis. What would she do? She hesitated. She glanced about the class. She smiled, as composed as ever, and then she continued speaking: 'I believe that the English language is the most expressive and contagious form of communication. To begin with, we should be thankful that we have this unique gift of a great language. And if we abuse it we are only abusing ourselves. So let us listen, heed, acknowledge our heritage, and yet explore and take risks with language …'

'THUMP, THUMP, THUMP …'

'We must forget England and their use of our common tongue. Even though English usage is fine, our own American language contains many deep wells of unexplored resources. These resources, as yet, remain untapped. Given the proper moment and the proper writers, there will one day be a literary explosion …'

'THUMP, THUMP, THUMP …'

Yes, Richard Waite was one of the few we never talked to. Actually, we were afraid of him. He wasn't somebody you could beat the shit out of, that would never make anybody feel better. You just wanted to get as far away from him as possible, you didn't want to look at him, you didn't want to look at those big lips, that big unfolding mouth like the mouth of a bruised frog. You shunned him because you couldn't defeat Richard Waite.

We waited and waited while Miss Gredis talked on about English versus American culture. We waited, while Richard Waite went on and on. Richard's fist banged against the underside of his desk top and the little girls glanced at each other and the guys were thinking, why is this asshole in this class with us? He's going to spoil everything. One asshole and Miss Gredis will pull her skirt down forever.

'THUMP, THUMP, THUMP …'

And then it stopped. Richard sat there. He was finished. We sneaked glances at him. He looked the same. Was his sperm laying in his lap or was it in his hand?

The bell rang. English class was over.

After that, there was more of the same. Richard Waite thumped it often while we listened to Miss Gredis sitting on that front desk with her legs crossed high. We boys accepted the situation. After a while we even were amused. The girls accepted it but they didn't like it, especially Lilly Fischman who was almost forgotten.

Besides Richard Waite, there was another problem for me in that class: Harry Walden. Harry Walden was pretty, the girls thought, and he had long golden curls and wore strange, delicate clothing. He looked like an 18th-century fop, lots of strange colors, dark green, dark blue, I don't know where the hell his parents found his clothes. And he always sat very still and listened attentively. Like he understood everything. The girls said, 'He's a genius.' He didn't look like anything to me. What I couldn't understand was that the tough guys didn't mess with him. It bothered me. How could he get off so easy?

I found him one day in the hall. I stopped him.

'You don't look like shit to me,' I said. 'How come everybody thinks you're hot shit?'

Walden glanced over to his right and when I turned my head to look in that direction, he slid around me as if I were something from the sewer and then a moment later he was in his seat in the class.

Almost every day it was Miss Gredis showing it all and Richard thumping away and this guy Walden sitting there saying nothing and acting like he believed he was a genius. I got sick of it.

I asked some of the other guys, 'Listen, do you really think Harry Walden is a genius? He just sits around in his pretty clothes and doesn't say anything. What does that prove? We could all do that.'

They didn't answer me. I couldn't understand their feelings about this fucking guy. And it got worse. Word got out that Harry Walden was going to see Miss Gredis every night, that he was her favorite pupil, and that they were making love. It made me sick. I could just imagine him getting out of his delicate green and blue outfit, folding it across a chair, then climbing out of his orange satin shorts and sliding under the sheets where Miss Gredis cuddled his curly golden head on her shoulder and fondled it and other things as well.

It was whispered about by the girls who always seemed to know everything. And even though the girls didn't particularly like Miss Gredis, they thought the situation was all right, that it was reasonable because Harry Walden was such a delicate genius and needed all the sympathy he could get.

I caught Harry Walden in the hall one more time.

'I'll kick your ass, you son-of-a-bitch, you don't fool me!'

Harry Walden looked at me. Then he looked over my shoulder and pointed and said, 'What's that over there?'

I looked around. When I looked back he was gone. He was sitting in the class safely surrounded by all the girls who thought he was a genius and who loved him.

There was more and more whispering about Harry Walden going over to Miss Gredis' house at night and some days Harry wouldn't even be in class. Those were the best days for me because I only had to deal with the thumping and not the golden curls and the adoration for that kind of stuff by all the little girls with their skirts and sweaters and starched gingham dresses. When Harry wasn't there the little girls would whisper, 'He's just too *sensitive …*'

And Red Kirkpatrick would say, 'She's fucking him to death.'

One afternoon I walked into class and Harry Walden's seat was empty. I figured he was just fucking-off as usual. Then the word drifted from desk to desk. I was always the last to know anything. It finally got to me: Harry Walden had committed suicide. The night before. Miss Gredis didn't know yet. I looked over at his seat. He'd never sit there again. All those colorful clothes shot to hell. Miss Gredis finished roll-call. She came and sat on the front desk, crossed her legs high. She had on a lighter shade of silk hose than ever before. Her skirt was hiked way back to her thighs.

'Our American culture,' she said, 'is destined for greatness. The English language, now so limited and structured, will be reinvented and improved upon. Our writers will use what I like to think of, in my mind, as *Americanese …*'

Miss Gredis' stockings were almost skin-colored. It was as if she were not wearing stockings at all, it was as if she were naked there in front of us, but since she wasn't and only appeared to be, that made it better than ever.

'More and more we will discover our own truths and our own way of speaking, and this new voice will be uncluttered by old histories, old mores, old dead and useless dreams …'

'*Thump, thump, thump …*'

25

Curly Wagner picked out Morris Moscowitz. It was after school and eight or ten of us guys had heard about it and we walked out behind the gym to watch. Wagner laid down the rules, ‘We fight until somebody hollers quit.’

‘OK with me,’ said Morris. Morris was a tall thin guy, he was a little bit dumb and he never said much or bothered anybody.

Wagner looked over at me. ‘And after I finish with this guy, I’m taking you on!’

‘*Me*, coach?’

‘Yeah, you, Chinaski.’

I sneered at him.

‘I’m going to get some god-damned respect from you guys if I have to whip all of you one by one!’

Wagner was cocky. He was always working out on the parallel bars or tumbling on the mat or taking laps around the track. He swaggered when he walked but he still had his pot belly. He liked to stand and stare at a guy for a long time like he was shit. I didn’t know what was bothering him. We worried him. I believe he thought we were fucking all the girls like crazy and he didn’t like to think about that.

They squared off. Wagner had some good moves. He bobbed, he weaved, he shuffled his feet, he moved in and out, and he made little hissing sounds. He was impressive. He caught Moscowitz with three straight left jabs. Moscowitz just stood there with his hands at his sides. He didn’t know anything about boxing. Then Wagner cracked Moscowitz with a right to the jaw. ‘Shit!’ said Morris and he threw a roundhouse right which Wagner ducked. Wagner countered with a right and left to Moscowitz’ face. Morris had a bloody nose. ‘Shit!’ he said and then he started swinging. And landing. You could hear the shots, they cracked against Wagner’s head. Wagner tried to counter but his punches just didn’t have the force and the fury of Moscowitz’.

‘Holy shit! Get him, Morrie!’

Moscowitz was a puncher. He dug a left to that pot belly. Wagner gasped and dropped. He fell to both knees. His face was cut and bleeding. His chin was on his chest and he looked sick.

'I quit,' Wagner said.

We left him there behind the building and we followed Morris Moscowitz out of there. He was our new hero.

'Shit, Morrie, you ought to turn pro!'

'Naw, I'm only thirteen years old.'

We walked over behind the machine shop and stood around the steps. Somebody lit up some cigarettes and we passed them around.

'What has that man got against us?' asked Morrie.

'Hell, Morrie, don't you know? He's jealous. He thinks we're fucking all the chicks!'

'Why, I've never even kissed a girl.'

'No shit, Morrie?'

'No shit.'

'You ought to try dry-fucking, Morrie, it's great!'

Then we saw Wagner walking past. He was working on his face with his handkerchief.

'Hey, coach,' yelled one of the guys, 'how about a rematch?'

He stood and looked at us. 'You boys put out those cigarettes!'

'Ah, no, coach, we like to smoke!'

'Come on over here, coach, and make us put out our cigarettes!'

'Yeah, come on, coach!'

Wagner stood looking at us. 'I'm not done with you yet! I'll get every one of you, one way or the other!'

'How ya gonna do that, coach? Your talents seem limited.'

'Yeah, coach, how ya gonna do it?'

He walked off the field to his car. I felt a little sorry for him. When a guy was that nasty he should be able to back it up.

'I guess he doesn't think there'll be a virgin on the grounds by the time we graduate,' said one of the guys.

'I think,' said another guy, 'that somebody jacked-off into his ear and he has come for brains.'

We left after that. It had been a fairly good day.

26

My mother went to her low-paying job each morning and my father, who didn't have a job, left each morning too. Although most of the neighbors were unemployed he didn't want them to think he was jobless. So he got into his car each morning at the same time and drove off as if he were going to work. Then in the evening he would return at exactly the same time. It was good for me because I had the place to myself. They locked the house but I knew how to get in. I would unhook the screen door with a piece of cardboard. They locked the porch door with a key from the inside. I slid a newspaper under the door and poked the key out. Then I pulled the newspaper from under the door and the key came with it. I would unlock the door and go in. When I left I would hook the screen door, lock the back porch door from the inside, leaving the key in. Then I would leave through the front door, putting the latch on lock.

I liked being alone. One day I was playing one of my games. There was a clock on the mantle with a second hand and I held contests to see how long I could hold my breath. Each time I did it I exceeded my own record. I went through much agony but I was proud each time I added some seconds to my record. This day I added a full five seconds and I was standing getting my breath back when I walked to the front window. It was a large window covered by red drapes. There was a crack between the drapes and I looked out. Jesus Christ! Our window was directly across from the front porch of the Andersons' house. Mrs Anderson was sitting on the steps, and I could look right up her dress. She was about 23 and had marvelously shaped legs. I could see almost all the way up her dress. Then I remember my father's army binoculars. They were on the top shelf of his closet. I ran and got them, ran back, crouched down and adjusted them to Mrs Anderson's legs. It took me right up there! And it was different from looking at Miss Gredis' legs: you didn't have to pretend you weren't looking. You could concentrate. And I did. I was right there. I was red hot. Jesus

Christ, what legs, what flanks! And each time she moved, it was unbearable and unbelievable.

I got down on my knees and I held the binoculars with one hand and pulled my cock out with the other. I spit in my palm and began. For a moment I thought I saw a flash of panties. I was about to come. I stopped. I kept looking with the binocs and then I started rubbing again. When I was about to come I stopped again. Then I waited and began rubbing again. This time I knew I wouldn't be able to stop. She was right there. I was looking right up her! It was like fucking. I came. I spurted all over the hardwood floor in front of the window. It was white and thick. I got up and went to the bathroom and got some toilet paper, came back and wiped it up. I took it back to the toilet and flushed it away.

Mrs Anderson came and sat on those steps almost every day and each time she did I got the binocs and whacked-off.

If Mr Anderson ever finds out about this, I thought, he'll kill me …

My parents went to the movies every Wednesday night. The theatre had drawings for money and they wanted to win some money. It was on a Wednesday night that I discovered something. The Pirozzis lived in the house south of ours. Our driveway ran along the north side of their house and there was a window which looked into their front room. The window was veiled by a thin curtain. There was a wall which became an arch over the front of our driveway and there were bushes all about. When I got between that wall and the window, in among all those bushes, nobody could see me from the street, especially at night.

I crawled in there. It was great, better than I expected. Mrs Pirozzi was sitting on the couch reading a newspaper. Her legs were crossed, and in an easy chair across the room, Mr Pirozzi was reading a newspaper. Mrs Pirozzi was not as young as Miss Gredis or Mrs Anderson, but she had good legs and she had on high heels and almost every time she turned a page of her newspaper, she'd cross her legs and her skirt would climb higher and I would see more.

If my parents come home from the movie and catch me here, I thought, then my life is over. But it's worth it. It's worth the risk.

I stayed very quiet behind the window and stared at Mrs Pirozzi's legs. They had a large collie, Jeff, who was asleep in front of the door. I had looked at Miss Gredis' legs that day in English class, then I had whacked-off to Mrs Anderson's legs, and now there was *more*. Why didn't Mr Pirozzi look at Mrs Pirozzi's legs? He just kept reading his newspaper. It was obvious that Mrs Pirozzi was trying to tease him because her skirt kept climbing higher and higher. Then she turned a page and crossed her legs very fast and her skirt *flipped* back exposing her pure white thighs. She was just like *buttermilk! Unbelievable!* She was best of *all!*

Then from the corner of my eye I saw Mr Pirozzi's legs move. He stood up very quickly and moved toward the front door. I started running, crashing through the bushes. I heard him open his front door. I was down the driveway and into our backyard and behind the garage. I stood a moment, listening. Then I climbed the back fence, over the vines and on over into the next backyard. I ran through that yard and up the driveway and I began dog-trotting south down the street like a guy practicing for track. There was nobody behind me but I kept trotting.

If he knows it was me, if he tells my father, I'm dead.

But maybe he just let the dog out to take a shit?

I trotted down to West Adams Boulevard and sat on a streetcar bench. I sat there five minutes or so, then I walked back home. When I got there, my parents weren't back yet. I went inside, undressed, turned out the lights and waited for morning …

Another Wednesday night Baldy and I were taking our usual short cut between two apartment houses. We were on our way to his father's wine cellar when Baldy stopped at a window. The shade was almost down but not quite. Baldy stopped, bent, and peeked inside. He waved me over.

'What is it?' I whispered.

'Look!'

There was a man and a woman in bed, naked. There was just a bedsheet partly over them. The man was trying to kiss the woman and she was pushing him away.

'God damn it, let me have it, Marie!'

'No!'

'But I'm hot, *please!*'

'Take your god-damned hands off me!'

'But, Marie, I love you!'

'You and your fucking love …'

'Marie, *please*.'

'Will you shut up?'

The man turned toward the wall. The woman picked up a magazine, bunched a pillow behind her head, and began reading it.

Baldy and I walked away from the window.

'Jesus,' said Baldy, 'that made me sick!'

'I thought we were going to see something,' I said.

When we got to the wine cellar Baldy's old man had put a big padlock on the cellar door.

We tried that window again and again but we never actually saw anything happen. It was always the same.

'Marie, it's been a long time. We're *living* together, you know. We're *married!*'

'Big fucking *deal!*'

'Just this *once*, Marie, and I won't bother you again, I won't bother you for a long time, I promise!'

'Shut up! You make me sick!'

Baldy and I walked away.

'Shit,' I said.

'Shit,' he said.

'I don't think he's got a cock,' I said.

'He might as well not have,' said Baldy.

We stopped going back there.

27

Wagner wasn't done with us. I was standing in the yard during gym class when he walked up to me.

'What are you doing, Chinaski?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing?'

I didn't answer.

'How come you're not in any of the games?'

'Shit. That's kid stuff.'

'I'm putting you on garbage detail until further notice.'

'What for? What's the charge?'

'Loitering. 50 demerits.'

The kids had to work off their demerits on garbage detail. If you had more than ten demerits and didn't work them off, you couldn't graduate. I didn't care whether I graduated or not. That was their problem. I could just stay around getting older and older and bigger and bigger. I'd get all the girls.

'50 demerits?' I asked. 'Is that all you're going to give me? How about a hundred?'

'OK, one hundred. You got 'em.'

Wagner swaggered off. Peter Mangalore had 500 demerits. Now I was in second place, and gaining …

The first garbage detail was during the last thirty minutes of lunch. The next day I was carrying a garbage can with Peter Mangalore. It was simple. We each had a stick with a sharp nail on the end of it. We picked up papers with the stick and stuck them into the can. The girls watched us as we walked by. They knew we were *bad*. Peter looked bored and I looked like I didn't give a damn. The girls knew we were *bad*.

'You know Lilly Fischman?' Pete asked as we walked along.

'Oh, yes, yes.'

'Well, she's not a virgin.'

'How do you know?'

'She told me.'

'Who got her?'

'Her father.'

'Hmmm … Well you can't blame him.'

'Lilly's heard I've got a big cock.'

'Yeah, it's all over school.'

'Well, Lilly wants it. She claims she can handle it.'

'You'll rip her to pieces.'

'Yeah, I will. Anyhow, she wants it.'

We put the garbage can down and stared at some girls who were sitting on a bench. Pete walked toward the bench. I stood there. He walked up to one of the girls and whispered something in her ear. She started giggling. Pete walked back to the garbage can. We picked it up and walked away.

'So,' said Pete, 'this afternoon at 4 p.m. I'm going to rip Lilly to pieces.'

'Yeah?'

'You know that broken-down car at the back of the school that Pop Farnsworth took the engine out of?'

'Yeah.'

'Well, before they haul that son-of-a-bitch away, that's going to be my bedroom. I'm going to take her in the back seat.'

'Some guys really live.'

'I'm getting a hard just thinking about it,' said Pete.

'I am too and I'm not even the guy who's going to do it.'

'There's one problem though,' said Pete.

'You can't come?'

'No, it's not that. I need a look-out. I need somebody to tell me the coast is clear.'

'Yeah? Well, look, I can do that.'

'Would you?' asked Pete.

'Sure. But we should have one more guy so we can watch in both directions.'

'All right. Who you got in mind?'

'Baldy.'

'Baldy? Shit, he's not much.'

'No, but he's trustworthy.'

'All right. So I'll see you guys at four.'

'We'll be there.'

At 4 p.m. we met Pete and Lilly at the car.

'Hi!' said Lilly. She looked hot. Pete was smoking a cigarette. He looked bored.

'Hello, Lilly,' I said.

'Hi, Lilly baby,' said Baldy.

There were some guys playing a game of touch football in the other field but that only made it better, a kind of camouflage. Lilly was wiggling around, breathing heavily, her breasts were moving up and down.

'Well,' said Pete, throwing his cigarette away, 'let's make friends, Lilly.'

He opened the back door, bowed, and Lilly climbed in. Pete got in after her and took his shoes off, then his pants and his shorts. Lilly looked down and saw Pete's meat hanging.

'Oh my,' she said, 'I don't know …'

'Come on, baby,' said Pete, 'nobody lives forever.'

'Well, all right, I guess …'

Pete looked out the window. 'Hey, are you guys watching to see if the coast is clear?'

'Yeah, Pete,' I said, 'we're watching.'

'We're looking,' said Baldy.

Pete pulled Lilly's skirt all the way up. There was white flesh above her knee socks and you could see her panties. Glorious.

Pete grabbed Lilly and kissed her. Then he pulled away.

'You whore!' he said.

'Talk to me nice, Pete!'

'You bitch-whore!' he said and slapped her across the face, hard.

She began sobbing. 'Don't, Pete, don't …'

'Shut up, cunt!'

Pete began pulling at Lilly's panties. He was having a terrible time. Her panties were tight around her big ass. Pete gave a violent tug, they ripped and he pulled the panties down around her legs and off over her shoes. He threw them on the floorboard. Then he began playing with her cunt. He played with her cunt and played with her cunt and kissed her again and again. Then he leaned back against the car seat. He only had half a hard.

Lilly looked down at him.

'What are you, a queer?'

'No, it's not that, Lilly. It's just that I don't think these guys are watching to see if the coast is clear. They're watching *us*. I don't want to get caught in here.'

'The coast is clear, Pete,' I said. 'We're watching!'

'We're watching!' said Baldy.

'I don't believe them,' said Pete. 'All they're watching is your cunt, Lilly.'

'You're *chicken!* All that meat and it's only at half-mast!'

'I'm scared of getting caught, Lilly.'

'I know what to do,' she said.

Lilly bent over and ran her tongue along Pete's cock. She lapped her tongue around the monstrous head. Then she had it in her mouth.

'Lilly … Christ,' said Pete, 'I love you …'

'Lilly, Lilly, Lilly … oh, oh, oooh ooooh …'

'*Henry!*' Baldy screamed. '*LOOK!*'

I looked. It was Wagner running toward us from across the field and also coming behind him were the guys who had been playing touch football, plus some of the people who had been watching the football game, boys and girls both.

'*Pete!*' I yelled, 'It's Wagner coming with 50 people!'

'*Shit!*' moaned Pete.

'Oh, shit,' said Lilly.

Baldy and I took off. We ran out the gate and halfway up the block. We looked back through the fence. Pete and Lilly never had a chance. Wagner ran up and ripped open the car door hoping for a good look. Then the car was surrounded and we couldn't see any more …

After that, we never saw Pete or Lilly again. We had no idea what happened to them. Baldy and I each got 1,000 demerits which put me in the lead over Mangalore with 1,100. There was no way I could work them off. I was in Mt Justin for life. Of course, they informed our parents.

'Let's go,' said my father, and I walked into the bathroom.

He got the strop down.

'Take down your pants and shorts,' he said.

I didn't do it. He reached in front of me, yanked my belt open, unbuttoned me and yanked my pants down. He pulled down my shorts. The strop landed. It was the same, the same explosive sound, the same pain.

'You're going to kill your mother!' he screamed.

He hit me again. But the tears weren't coming. My eyes were strangely dry. I thought about killing him. That there must be a way to kill him. In a couple of years I could beat him to death. But I wanted him now. He wasn't much of anything. I must have been adopted. He hit me again. The pain was still there but the fear of it was gone. The strop landed again. The room no longer blurred. I could see everything clearly. My father seemed to sense the difference in me and he began to lash me harder, again and again, but the more he beat me the less I felt. It was almost as if he was the one who was helpless. Something had occurred, something had changed. My father stopped, puffing, and I heard him hanging up the strop. He walked to the door. I turned.

'Hey,' I said.

My father turned and looked at me.

'Give me a couple more,' I told him, 'if it makes you feel any better.'

'Don't you *dare* talk to me that way!' he said.

I looked at him. I saw folds of flesh under his chin and around his neck. I saw sad wrinkles and crevices. His face was tired pink putty. He was in his undershirt, and his belly sagged, wrinkling his undershirt. The eyes were no longer fierce. His eyes looked away and couldn't meet mine. Something had happened. The bath towels knew it, the shower curtain knew it, the mirror knew it, the bathtub and the toilet knew it. My father turned and walked out the door. He knew it. It was my last beating. From him.

28

Jr high went by quickly enough. About the 8th grade, going into the 9th, I broke out with acne. Many of the guys had it but not like mine. Mine was really terrible. I was the worst case in town. I had pimples and boils all over my face, back, neck, and some on my chest. It happened just as I was beginning to be accepted as a tough guy and a leader. I was still tough but it wasn't the same. I had to withdraw. I watched people from afar, it was like a stage play. Only they were on stage and I was an audience of one. I'd always had trouble with the girls but with acne it was impossible. The girls were further away than ever. Some of them were truly beautiful – their dresses, their hair, their eyes, the way they stood around. Just to walk down the street during an afternoon with one, you know, talking about everything and anything, I think that would have made me feel very good.

Also, there was still something about me that continually got me into trouble. Most teachers didn't trust or like me, especially the lady teachers. I never said anything out of the way but they claimed it was my 'attitude.' It was something about the way I sat slouched in my seat and my 'voice tone.' I was usually accused of 'sneering' although I wasn't conscious of it. I was often made to stand outside in the hall during class or I was sent to the principal's office. The principal always did the same thing. He had a phone booth in his office. He made me stand in the phone booth with the door closed. I spent many hours in that phone booth. The only reading material in there was the *Ladies Home Journal*. It was deliberate torture. I read the *Ladies Home Journal* anyhow. I got to read each new issue. I hoped that maybe I could learn something about women.

I must have had 5,000 demerits by graduation time but it didn't seem to matter. They wanted to get rid of me. I was standing outside in the line that was filing into the auditorium one by one. We each had on our cheap little cap and gown that had been passed down again and again to the next graduating group. We could hear each person's name as they walked across the stage. They were making one big god-damned deal out of graduating from jr high. The band played our school song:

Oh, Mt Justin, Oh, Mt Justin
We will be true,
Our hearts are singing wildly
All our skies are blue …

We stood in line, each of us waiting to march across the stage. In the audience were our parents and friends.

'I'm about to puke,' said one of the guys.

'We only go from crap to more crap,' said another.

The girls seemed to be more serious about it. That's why I didn't really trust them. They seemed to be part of the wrong things. They and the school seemed to have the same song.

'This stuff brings me down,' said one of the guys. 'I wish I had a smoke.'

'Here you are …' Another of the guys handed him a cigarette. We passed it around between four or five of us. I took a hit and exhaled through my nostrils. Then I saw Curly Wagner walking in.

'Ditch it!' I said. 'Here comes vomit-head!'

Wagner walked right up to me. He was dressed in his grey gym suit, including sweatshirt, just as he had been the first time I saw him and all the other times afterward. He stood in front of me.

'Listen,' he said, 'you think you're getting away from me because you're getting out of here, but you're not! I'm going to follow you the rest of your life. I'm going to follow you to the ends of the earth and I'm going to get you!'

I just glanced at him without comment and he walked off. Wagner's little graduation speech only made me that much bigger with the guys. They thought I must have done some big god-damned thing to rile him. But it wasn't true. Wagner was just simple-crazy.

We got nearer and nearer to the doorway of the auditorium. Not only could we hear each name being announced, and the applause, but we could see the audience.

Then it was my turn.

'Henry Chinaski,' the principal said over the microphone. And I walked forward. There was no applause. Then one kindly soul in the audience gave two or three claps.

There were rows of seats set up on the stage for the graduating class. We sat there and waited. The principal gave his speech about opportunity and success in America. Then it was all over. The band struck up the Mt Justin school song. The students and their parents and friends rose and mingled together. I walked around, looking. My parents weren't there. I made sure. I walked around and gave it a good look-see.

It was just as well. A tough guy didn't need that. I took off my ancient cap and gown and handed it to the guy at the end of the aisle – the janitor. He folded the pieces up for the next time.

I walked outside. The first one out. But where could I go? I had eleven cents in my pocket. I walked back to where I lived.

29

That summer, July 1934, they gunned down John Dillinger outside the movie house in Chicago. He never had a chance. The Lady in Red had fingered him. More than a year earlier the banks had collapsed. Prohibition was repealed and my father drank Eastside beer again. But the worst thing was Dillinger getting it. A lot of people admired Dillinger and it made everybody feel terrible. Roosevelt was President. He gave Fireside Chats over the radio and everybody listened. He could really talk. And he began to enact programs to put people to work. But things were still very bad. And my boils got worse, they were unbelievably large.

That September I was scheduled to go to Woodhaven High but my father insisted I go to Chelsey High.

'Look,' I told him, 'Chelsey is out of this district. It's too far away.'

'You'll do as I tell you. You'll register at Chelsey High.'

I knew why he wanted me to go to Chelsey. The rich kids went there. My father was crazy. He still thought about being rich. When Baldy found out I was going to Chelsey he decided to go there too. I couldn't get rid of him or my boils.

The first day we rode our bikes to Chelsey and parked them. It was a terrible feeling. Most of those kids, at least all the older ones, had their own automobiles, many of them new convertibles, and they weren't black or dark blue like most cars, they were bright yellow, green, orange and red. The guys sat in them outside of the school and the girls gathered around and went for rides. Everybody was nicely dressed, the guys and the girls, they had pullover sweaters, wrist watches and the latest in shoes. They seemed very adult and poised and superior. And there I was in my homemade shirt, my one ragged pair of pants, my rundown shoes, and I was covered with boils. The guys with the cars didn't worry about acne. They were very handsome, they were tall and clean with bright teeth and they didn’t wash their hair with hand soap. They seemed to know something I didn’t know. I was at the bottom again.

Since all the guys had cars Baldy and I were ashamed of our bicycles. We left them home and walked to school and back, two-and-one-half miles each way. We carried brown-bag lunches. But most of the other students didn’t even eat in the school cafeteria. They drove to malt shops with the girls, played the juke boxes and laughed. They were on their way to USC.

I was ashamed of my boils. At Chelsey you had a choice between gym and Reserve Officer Training Corps. I took ROTC because then I didn’t have to wear a gym suit and nobody could see the boils on my body. But I hated the uniform. The shirt was made of wool and it irritated my boils. The uniform was worn from Monday to Thursday. On Friday we were allowed to wear regular clothes.

We studied the Manual of Arms. It was about warfare and shit like that. We had to pass exams. We marched around the field. We practiced the Manual of Arms. Handling the rifle during various drills was bad for me. I had boils on my shoulders. Sometimes when I slammed the rifle against my shoulder a boil would break and leak through my shirt. The blood would come through but because the shirt was thick and made of wool the spot wasn’t obvious and didn’t look like blood.

I told my mother what was happening. She lined the shoulders of my shirts with white patches of cloth, but it only helped a little.

Once an officer came through on inspection. He grabbed the rifle out of my hands and held it up, peering through the barrel, for dust in the bore. He slammed the rifle back at me, then looked at a blood spot on my right shoulder.

‘Chinaski!’ he snapped, ‘your rifle is leaking oil!’

‘Yes, sir.’

I got through the term but the boils got worse and worse. They were as large as walnuts and covered my face. I was very ashamed. Sometimes at home I would stand before the bathroom mirror and break one of the boils. Yellow pus would spurt and splatter on the mirror. And little white hard pits. In a horrible way it was fascinating that all that stuff was in there. But I knew how hard it was for other people to look at me.

The school must have advised my father. At the end of that term I was withdrawn from school. I went to bed and my parents covered me with ointments. There was a brown salve that stank. My father preferred that one for me. It burned. He insisted that I keep it on longer, much longer than the instructions advised. One night he insisted that I leave it on for hours. I began screaming. I ran to the tub, filled it with water and washed the salve off, with difficulty. I was burned, on my face, my back and chest. That night I sat on the edge of the bed. I couldn't lay down.

My father came into the room.

'I thought I told you to leave that stuff on!'

'Look what happened,' I told him.

My mother came into the room.

'The son-of-a-bitch doesn't *want* to get well,' my father told her. 'Why did I have to have a son like this?'

My mother lost her job. My father kept leaving in his car every morning as if he were going to work. 'I'm an engineer,' he told people. He had always wanted to be an engineer.

It was arranged for me to go to the LA County General Hospital. I was given a long white card. I took the white card and got on the #7 streetcar. The fare was seven cents (or four tokens for a quarter). I dropped in my token and walked to the back of the streetcar. I had an 8.30 a.m. appointment.

A few blocks later a young boy and a woman got on the streetcar. The woman was fat and the boy was about four years old. They sat in the seat behind me. I looked out the window. We rolled along. I liked that #7 streetcar. It went really fast and rocked back and forth as the sun shone outside.

'Mommy,' I heard the young boy say, 'What's *wrong* with that man's face?'

The woman didn't answer.

The boy asked her the same question again.

She didn’t answer.

Then the boy screamed it out, ‘*Mommy! What’s wrong with that man’s face?*’

‘Shut up! I don’t know what’s wrong with his face!’

I went to Admissions at the hospital and they instructed me to report to the fourth floor. There the nurse at the desk took my name and told me to be seated. We sat in two long rows of green metal chairs facing one another. Mexicans, whites and blacks. There were no Orientals. There was nothing to read. Some of the patients had day-old newspapers. The people were of all ages, thin and fat, short and tall, old and young. Nobody talked. Everybody seemed very tired. Orderlies walked back and forth, sometimes you saw a nurse, but never a doctor. An hour went by, two hours. Nobody’s name was called. I got up to look for a water fountain. I looked in the little rooms where people were to be examined. There wasn’t anybody in any of the rooms, neither doctors or patients.

I went to the desk. The nurse was staring down into a big fat book with names written in it. The phone rang. She answered it.

‘Dr Menen isn’t here yet.’ She hung up.

‘Pardon me,’ I said.

‘Yes?’ the nurse asked.

‘The doctors aren’t here yet. Can I come back later?’

‘No.’

‘But there’s nobody here.’

‘The doctors are on call.’

‘But I have an 8.30 appointment.’

‘Everybody here has an 8.30 appointment.’

There were 45 or 50 people waiting.

‘Since I’m on the waiting list, suppose I come back in a couple of hours, maybe there will be some doctors here then.’

‘If you leave now, you will automatically lose your appointment. You will have to return tomorrow if you still wish for treatment.’

I walked back and sat in a chair. The others didn't protest. There was very little movement. Sometimes two or three nurses would walk by laughing. Once they pushed a man past in a wheelchair. Both of his legs were heavily bandaged and his ear on the side of his head toward me had been sliced off. There was a black hole divided into little sections, and it looked like a spider had gone in there and made a spider web. Hours passed. Noon came and went. Another hour. Two hours. We sat and waited. Then somebody said, 'There's a doctor!'

The doctor walked into one of the examination rooms and closed the door. We all watched. Nothing. A nurse went in. We heard her laughing. Then she walked out. Five minutes. Ten minutes. The doctor walked out with a clipboard in his hand.

'Martinez?' the doctor asked. 'José Martinez?'

An old thin Mexican man stood up and began walking toward the doctor.

'Martinez? Martinez, old boy, how are you?'

'Sick, doctor … I think I die …'

'Well, now … Step in here …'

Martinez was in there a long time. I picked up a discarded newspaper and tried to read it. But we were all thinking about Martinez. If Martinez ever got out of there, someone would be next.

Then Martinez screamed. 'AHHHHH! AHHHHH! STOP! STOP! AHHHH! MERCY! GOD! PLEASE STOP!'

'Now, now, that doesn't hurt …' said the doctor.

Martinez screamed again. A nurse ran into the examination room. There was silence. All we could see was the black shadow of the half-open doorway. Then an orderly ran into the examination room. Martinez made a gurgling sound. He was taken out of there on a rolling stretcher. The nurse and the orderly pushed him down the hall and through some swinging doors. Martinez was under a sheet but he wasn't dead because the sheet wasn't pulled over his face.

The doctor stayed in the examination room for another ten minutes. Then he came out with the clipboard.

‘Jefferson Williams?’ he asked.

There was no answer.

‘Is Jefferson Williams here?’

There was no response.

‘Mary Blackthorne?’

There was no answer.

‘Harry Lewis?’

‘Yes, doctor?’

‘Step forward, please …’

It was very slow. The doctor saw five more patients. Then he left the examination room, stopped at the desk, lit a cigarette and talked to the nurse for fifteen minutes. He looked like a very intelligent man. He had a twitch on the right side of his face, which kept jumping, and he had red hair with streaks of grey. He wore glasses and kept taking them off and putting them back on. Another nurse came in and gave him a cup of coffee. He took a sip, then holding the coffee in one hand he pushed the swinging doors open with the other and was gone.

The office nurse came out from behind the desk with our long white cards and she called our names. As we answered, she handed each of us our card back. ‘This ward is closed for the day. Please return tomorrow if you wish. Your appointment time is stamped on your card.’

I looked down at my card. It was stamped 8.30 a.m.

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I got lucky the next day. They called my name. It was a different doctor. I stripped down. He turned a hot white light on me and looked me over. I was sitting on the edge of the examination table.

'Hmmm, hmmmm,' he said, 'uh huh …'

I sat there.

'How long have you had this?'

'A couple of years. It keeps getting worse and worse.'

'Ah hah.'

He kept looking.

'Now, you just stretch out there on your stomach. I'll be right back.'

Some moments passed and suddenly there were many people in the room. They were all doctors. At least they looked and talked like doctors. Where had they come from? I had thought there were hardly any doctors at LA County General Hospital.

'Acne vulgaris. The worst case I've seen in all my years of practice!'

'Fantastic!'

'Incredible!'

'Look at the face!'

'The neck!'

'I just finished examining a young girl with acne vulgaris. Her back was covered. She cried. She told me, "How will I ever get a man? My back will be scarred forever. I want to kill myself!" And now look at *this* fellow! If she could see him, she'd know that she really had nothing to complain about!'

You dumb fuck, I thought, don't you realize that I can hear what you're saying?

How did a man get to be a doctor? Did they take anybody?

'Is he asleep?'

'Why?'

'He seems very calm.'

'No, I don't think he's asleep. Are you asleep, my boy?'

‘Yes.’

They kept moving the hot white light about on various parts of my body.

‘Turn over.’

I turned over.

‘Look, there’s a lesion inside of his mouth!’

‘Well, how will we treat it?’

‘The electric needle, I think …’

‘Yes, of course, the electric needle.’

‘Yes, the needle.’

It was decided.

31

The next day I sat in the hall in my green tin chair, waiting to be called. Across from me sat a man who had something wrong with his nose. It was very red and very raw and very fat and long and it was growing upon itself. You could see where section had grown upon section. Something had irritated the man's nose and it had just started growing. I looked at the nose and then tried not to look. I didn't want the man to see me looking, I knew how he felt. But the man seemed very comfortable. He was fat and sat there almost asleep.

They called him first: 'Mr Sleeth?'

He moved forward a bit in his chair.

'Sleeth? Richard Sleeth?'

'Uh? Yes, I'm here …'

He stood up and moved toward the doctor.

'How are you today, Mr Sleeth?'

'Fine … I'm all right …'

He followed the doctor into the examination room.

I got my call an hour later. I followed the doctor through some swinging doors and into another room. It was larger than the examination room. I was told to disrobe and to sit on a table. The doctor looked at me.

'You really have a case there, haven't you?'

'Yeah.'

He poked at a boil on my back.

'That hurt?'

'Yeah.'

'Well,' he said, 'we're going to try to get some drainage.'

I heard him turn on the machinery. It made a whirring sound. I could smell oil getting hot.

'Ready?' he asked.

'Yeah.'

He pushed the electric needle into my back. I was being drilled. The pain was immense. It filled the room. I felt the blood run down my back. Then he pulled the needle out.

'Now we're going to get another one,' said the doctor.

He jammed the needle into me. Then he pulled it out and jammed it into a third boil. Two other men had walked in and were standing there watching. They were probably doctors. The needle went into me again.

'I never saw anybody go under the needle like that,' said one of the men.

'He gives no sign at all,' said the other man.

'Why don't you guys go out and pinch some nurse's ass?' I asked them.

'Look, son, you can't talk to us like that!'

The needle dug into me. I didn't answer.

'The boy is evidently very bitter …'

'Yes, of course, that's it.'

The men walked out.

'Those are fine professional men,' said my doctor. 'It's not good of you to abuse them.'

'Just go ahead and drill,' I told him.

He did. The needle got very hot but he went on and on. He drilled my entire back, then he got my chest. Then I stretched out and he drilled my neck and my face.

A nurse came in and she got her instructions. 'Now, Miss Ackerman, I want these … pustules … thoroughly drained. And when you get to the blood, keep squeezing. I want thorough drainage.'

'Yes, Dr Grundy.'

'And afterwards, the ultra-violet ray machine. Two minutes on each side to begin with …'

'Yes, Dr Grundy.'

I followed Miss Ackerman into another room. She told me to lay down on the table. She got a tissue and started on the first boil.

'Does this hurt?'

'It's all right.'

'You poor boy …'

'Don't worry. I'm just sorry you have to do this.'

'You poor boy ...'

Miss Ackerman was the first person to give me any sympathy. It felt strange. She was a chubby little nurse in her early thirties.

'Are you going to school?' she asked.

'No, they had to take me out.'

Miss Ackerman kept squeezing as she talked.

'What do you do all day?'

'I just stay in bed.'

'That's awful.'

'No, it's nice. I like it.'

'Does this hurt?'

'Go ahead. It's all right.'

'What's so nice about laying in bed all day?'

'I don't have to see anybody.'

'You like that?'

'Oh, yes.'

'What do you do all day?'

'Some of the day I listen to the radio.'

'What do you listen to?'

'Music. And people talking.'

'Do you think of girls?'

'Sure. But that's out.'

'You don't want to think that way.'

'I make charts of airplanes going overhead. They come over at the same time each day. I have them timed. Say that I know that one of them is going to pass over at 11.15 a.m. Around eleven ten, I start listening for the sound of the motor. I try to hear the first sound. Sometimes I imagine I hear it and sometimes I'm not sure and then I begin to hear it,' way off, for sure. And the sound gets stronger. Then at 11.15 a.m. it passes overhead and the sound is as loud as it's going to get.'

'You do that every day?'

'Not when I'm here.'

'Turn over,' said Miss Ackerman.

I did. Then in the ward next to us a man started screaming. We were next to the disturbed ward. He was really loud.

'What are they doing to him?' I asked Miss Ackerman.

'He's in the shower.'

'And it makes him scream like that?'

'Yes.'

'I'm worse off than he is.'

'No, you're not.'

I liked Miss Ackerman. I sneaked a look at her. Her face was round, she wasn't very pretty but she wore her nurse's cap in a perky manner and she had large dark brown eyes. It was the eyes. As she balled up some tissue to throw into the dispenser I watched her walk. Well, she was no Miss Gredis, and I had seen many other women with better figures, but there was something warm about her. She wasn't constantly thinking about being a woman.

'As soon as I finish your face,' she said, 'I will put you under the ultra-violet ray machine. Your next appointment will be the day after tomorrow at 8.30 a.m.'

We didn't talk any more after that.

Then she was finished. I put on goggles and Miss Ackerman turned on the ultra-violet ray machine.

There was a ticking sound. It was peaceful. It might have been the automatic timer, or the metal reflector on the lamp heating up. It was comforting and relaxing, but when I began to think about it, I decided that everything that they were doing for me was useless. I figured that at best the needle would leave scars on me for the remainder of my life. That was bad enough but it wasn't what I really minded. What I minded was that they didn't know how to deal with me. I sensed this in their discussions and in their manner. They were hesitant, uneasy, yet also somehow disinterested and bored. Finally it didn't matter what they did. They just had to do something – anything – because to do nothing would be unprofessional.

They experimented on the poor and if that worked they used the treatment on the rich. And if it didn't work, there would still be more poor left over to experiment upon.

The machine signaled its warning that two minutes were up. Miss Ackerman came in, told me to turn over, re-set the machine, then left. She was the kindest person I had met in eight years.

32

The drilling and squeezing continued for weeks but there was little result. When one boil vanished another would appear. I often stood in front of the mirror alone, wondering how ugly a person could get. I would look at my face in disbelief, then turn to examine all the boils on my back. I was horrified. No wonder people stared, no wonder they said unkind things. It was not simply a case of teenage acne. These were inflamed, relentless, large, swollen boils filled with pus. I felt singled out, as if I had been *selected* to be this way. My parents never spoke to me about my condition. They were still on relief. My mother left each morning to look for work and my father drove off as if he were working. On Saturdays people on relief got free foodstuffs from the markets, mostly canned goods, almost always cans of hash for some reason. We ate a great deal of hash. And Bologna sandwiches. And potatoes. My mother learned to make potato pancakes. Each Saturday when my parents went for their free food they didn't go to the nearest market because they were afraid some of the neighbors might see them and then know that they were on the dole. So they walked two miles down Washington Boulevard, to a store a couple of blocks past Crenshaw. It was a long walk. They walked the two miles back, sweating, carrying their shopping bags full of canned hash and potatoes and Bologna and carrots. My father didn't drive because he wanted to save gas. He needed the gas to drive to and from his invisible job. The other fathers weren't like that. They just sat quietly on their front porches or played horseshoes in the vacant lot.

The doctor gave me a white substance to apply to my face. It hardened and caked on the boils, giving me a plaster-like look. The substance didn't seem to help. I was home alone one afternoon, applying this substance to my face and body. I was standing in my shorts trying to reach the infected areas of my back with my hand when I heard voices. It was Baldy and his friend Jimmy Hatcher. Jimmy Hatcher was a good-looking fellow and he was a wise-ass.

'Henry!' I heard Baldy calling. I heard him talking to Jimmy. Then he walked up on the porch and beat on the door. 'Hey, Hank, it's Baldy! Open up!'

You damn fool, I thought, don't you understand that I don't want to see anybody?

'Hank! Hank! It's Baldy and Jim!'

He beat on the front door.

I heard him talking to Jim. 'Listen, I saw him! I saw him walking around in there!'

'He doesn't answer.'

'We better go in. He might be in trouble.'

You fool, I thought, I befriended you. I befriended you when nobody else could stand you. Now, look at this!

I couldn't believe it. I ran into the hall and hid in a closet, leaving the door slightly open. I was sure they wouldn't come into the house. But they did. I had left the back door open. I heard them walking around in the house.

'He's got to be here,' said Baldy. 'I saw something moving in here …'

Jesus Christ, I thought, can't I move around in here? I live in this house.

I was crouched in the dark closet. I knew I couldn't let them find me in there.

I swung the closet door open and leaped out. I saw them both standing in the front room. I ran in there.

'GET OUT OF HERE, YOU SONS-OF-BITCHES!'

They looked at me.

'GET OUT OF HERE! YOU'VE GOT NO RIGHT TO BE IN HERE! GET OUT OF HERE BEFORE I KILL YOU!'

They started running toward the back porch.

'GO ON! GO ON, OR I'LL KILL YOU!'

I heard them run up the driveway and out onto the sidewalk. I didn't want to watch them. I went into my bedroom and stretched out on the bed. Why did they want to see me? What could they do? There was nothing to be done. There was nothing to talk about.

A couple of days later my mother didn't leave to go job hunting, and it wasn't my day to go to the LA County General Hospital. So we were in the house together. I didn't like it. I liked the place to myself. I heard her moving about the house and I stayed in my bedroom. The boils were worse than ever. I checked my airplane chart. The 1.20 p.m. flight was due. I began listening. He was late. It was one twenty and he was still approaching. As he passed over I timed him as being three minutes late. Then I heard the doorbell ring. I heard my mother open the door.

'Emily, how are you?'

'Hello, Katy, how are you?'

It was my grandmother, now very old. I heard them talking but I couldn't make out what they were saying. I was thankful for that. They talked for five or ten minutes and then I heard them walking down the hall to my bedroom.

'I will bury all of you,' I heard my grandmother say. 'Where is the boy?'

The door opened and my grandmother and mother stood there.

'Hello, Henry,' my grandmother said.

'Your grandmother is here to help you,' my mother said.

My grandmother had a large purse. She set it down on the dresser and pulled a huge silver crucifix out of it.

'Your grandmother is here to help you, Henry …'

Grandmother had more warts on her than ever before and she was fatter. She looked invincible, she looked as if she would never die. She had gotten so old that it was almost senseless for her to die.

'Henry,' said my mother, 'turn over on your stomach.'

I turned over and my grandmother leaned over me. From the corner of my eye I saw her dangling the huge crucifix over me. I had decided against religion a couple of years back. If it were true, it made fools out of people, or it drew fools. And if it weren't true, the fools were all the more foolish.

But it was my grandmother and my mother. I decided to let them have their way. The crucifix swung back and forth above my back, over my boils, over me.

'God,' prayed my grandmother, 'purge the devil from this poor boy's body! Just look at all those sores! They make me sick, God! *Look* at them! It's the devil, God, dwelling in this boy's body. Purge the devil from his body, Lord!'

'Purge the devil from his body, Lord!' said my mother.

What I need is a good doctor, I thought. What is wrong with these women? Why don't they leave me alone?

'God,' said my grandmother, 'why do you allow the devil to dwell inside this body's body? Don't you see how the devil is enjoying this? Look at these sores, O Lord, I am about to vomit just looking at them! They are red and big and full!'

'PURGE THE DEVIL FROM MY BOY'S BODY!' screamed my mother.

'MAY GOD SAVE US FROM THIS EVIL!' screamed my grandmother.

She took the crucifix and poked it into the center of my back, dug it in. The blood spurted out, I could feel it, at first warm, then suddenly cold. I turned over and sat up in the bed.

'What the fuck are you doing?'

'I am making a hole for the devil to be pushed out by God!' said my grandmother.

'All right,' I said, 'I want you both to get out of here, and fast! Do you understand me?'

'He is still possessed!' said my grandmother.

'GET THE FUCKING HELL OUT OF HERE!' I screamed.

They left, shocked and disappointed, closing the door behind them.

I went into the bathroom, wadded up some toilet paper and tried to stop the bleeding. I pulled the toilet paper away and looked at it. It was soaked. I got a new batch of toilet paper and held it to my back awhile. Then I got the iodine. I made passes at my back, trying to reach the wound with the iodine. It was difficult. I finally gave up. Who ever heard of an infected back, anyhow? You either lived or died. The back was something the assholes had never figured out how to amputate.

I walked back into the bedroom and got into bed and pulled the covers to my throat. I looked up at the ceiling as I talked to myself.

All right, God, say that You are really there. You have put me in this fix. You want to test me. Suppose I test You? Suppose I say that You are not there? You've given me a supreme test with my parents and with these boils. I think that I have passed Your test. I am tougher than You. If You will come down here right now, I will spit into Your face, if You have a face. And do You shit? The priest never answered that question. He told us not to doubt. Doubt what? I think that You have been picking on me too much so I am asking You to come down here so I can put You to the test!

I waited. Nothing. I waited for God. I waited and waited. I believe I slept.

I never slept on my back. But when I awakened I was on my back and it surprised me. My legs were bent at the knees in front of me, making a mountain-like effect with the blankets. And as I looked at the blanket-mountain before me I saw two eyes staring at me. Only the eyes were dark, black, blank … looking at me from underneath a hood, a black hood with a sharp tall peak, like a ku-klux-klansman. They kept staring at me, dark blank eyes, and there was nothing I could do about it. I was truly terrified. I thought, it's God but God isn't supposed to look like that.

I couldn't stare it down. I couldn't move. It just stayed there looking at me over the mound of my knees and the blanket. I wanted to get away. I wanted *it* to leave. It was powerful and black and threatening.

It seemed to remain there for hours, just staring at me.

Then it was gone …

I stayed in bed thinking about it.

I couldn't believe that it had been God. Dressed like that. That would be a cheap trick.

It had been an illusion, of course.

I thought about it for ten or fifteen minutes, then I got up and went to get the little brown box my grandmother had given me many years ago. Inside of it were tiny rolls of paper with quotations from the Bible. Each tiny roll was held in a cubicle of its own. One was supposed to ask a question and the little roll of paper one pulled out was supposed to answer that question. I had tried it before and found it useless. Now I tried it again. I asked the brown box, 'What did that mean? What did those eyes mean?'

I pulled out a paper and unrolled it. It was a tiny stiff white piece of paper. I unrolled and read it.

GOD HAS FORSAKEN YOU.

I rolled the paper up and stuck it back into its cubicle in the brown box. I didn't believe it. I went back to bed and thought about it. It was too simple, too direct. I didn't believe it. I considered masturbating to bring me back to reality. I still didn't believe it. I got back up and started unrolling all the little papers inside the brown box. I was looking for the one that said, GOD HAS FORSAKEN YOU. I unrolled them all. None of them said that. I read them all and none of them said that. I rolled them up and put them carefully back into their cubicles in the little brown box.

Meanwhile, the boils got worse. I kept getting onto streetcar #7 and going to LA County General Hospital and I began to fall in love with Miss Ackerman, my nurse of the squeezings. She would never know how each stab of pain caused courage to well up in me. Despite the horror of the blood and the pus, she was always humane and kind. My love-feeling for her wasn't sexual. I just wished that she would enfold me in her starched whiteness and that together we could vanish forever from the world. But she never did that. She was too practical. She would only remind me of my next appointment.

33

The ultra-violet ray machine clicked off. I had been treated on both sides. I took off the goggles and began to dress. Miss Ackerman walked in.

'Not yet,' she said, 'keep your clothes off.'

What is she going to do to me, I thought?

'Sit up on the edge of the table.'

I sat there and she began rubbing salve over my face. It was a thick buttery substance.

'The doctors have decided on a new approach. We're going to bandage your face to effect drainage.'

'Miss Ackerman, what ever happened to that man with the big nose? The nose that kept growing?'

'Mr Sleeth?'

'The man with the big nose.'

'That was Mr Sleeth.'

'I don't see him anymore. Did he get cured?'

'He's dead.'

'You mean he died from that big nose?'

'Suicide.' Miss Ackerman continued to apply the salve.

Then I heard a man scream from the next ward, '*Joe, where are you? Joe, you said you'd come back! Joe, where are you?*'

The voice was loud and so sad, so agonized.

'He's done that every afternoon this week,' said Miss Ackerman, 'and Joe's not going to come get him.'

'Can't they help him?'

'I don't know. They all quiet down, finally. Now take your finger and hold this pad while I bandage you. There. Yes. That's it. Now let go. Fine.'

'*Joe! Joe, you said you'd come back! Where are you, Joe?*'

'Now, hold your finger on this pad. There. Hold it there. I'm going to wrap you up good! There. Now I'll secure the dressings.'

Then she was finished.

‘OK, put on your clothes. See you the day after tomorrow. Goodbye, Henry.’

‘Goodbye, Miss Ackerman.’

I got dressed, left the room and walked down the hall. There was a mirror on a cigarette machine in the lobby. I looked into the mirror. It was great. My whole head was bandaged. I was all white. Nothing could be seen but my eyes, my mouth and my ears, and some tufts of hair sticking up at the top of my head. I was *hidden*. It was wonderful. I stood and lit a cigarette and glanced about the lobby. Some in-patients were sitting about reading magazines and newspapers. I felt very exceptional and a bit evil. Nobody had any idea of what had happened to me. Car crash. A fight to the death. A murder. Fire. Nobody knew.

I walked out of the lobby and out of the building and I stood on the sidewalk. I could still hear him. ‘*Joe! Joe! Where are you, Joe!*’

Joe wasn’t coming. It didn’t pay to trust another human being. Humans didn’t have it, whatever it took.

On the streetcar ride back I sat in the back smoking cigarettes out of my bandaged head. People stared but I didn’t care. There was more fear than horror in their eyes now. I hoped I could stay this way forever.

I rode to the end of the line and got off. The afternoon was going into evening and I stood on the corner of Washington Boulevard and Westview Avenue watching the people. Those few who had jobs were coming home from work. My father would soon be driving home from his fake job. I didn’t have a job, I didn’t go to school. I didn’t do anything. I was bandaged, I was standing on the corner smoking a cigarette. I was a tough man, I was a dangerous man. I knew things. Sleeth had suicided. I wasn’t going to suicide. I’d rather kill some of them. I’d take four or five of them with me. I’d show them what it meant to play around with me.

A woman walked down the street toward me. She had fine legs. First I stared right into her eyes and then I looked down at her legs, and as she passed I watched her ass, I drank her ass in. I memorized her ass and the seams of her silk stockings.

I never could have done that without my bandages.

34

The next day in bed I got tired of waiting for the airplanes and I found a large yellow notebook that had been meant for high school work. It was empty. I found a pen. I went to bed with the notebook and the pen. I made some drawings. I drew women in high-heeled shoes with their legs crossed and their skirts pulled back.

Then I began writing. It was about a German aviator in World War I. Baron Von Himmlen. He flew a red Fokker. And he was not popular with his fellow fliers. He didn't talk to them. He drank alone and he flew alone. He didn't bother with women, although they all loved him. He was above that. He was too busy. He was busy shooting Allied planes out of the sky. Already he had shot down 110 and the war wasn't over. His red Fokker, which he referred to as the 'October Bird of Death,' was known everywhere. Even the enemy ground troops knew him as he often flew low over them, taking their gunfire and laughing, dropping bottles of champagne to them suspended from little parachutes. Baron Von Himmlen was never attacked by less than five Allied planes at a time. He was an ugly man with scars on his face, but he was beautiful if you looked long enough – it was in the eyes, his style, his courage, his fierce aloneness.

I wrote pages and pages about the Baron's dog fights, how he would knock down three or four planes, fly back, almost nothing left of his red Fokker. He'd bounce down, leap out of the plane while it was still rolling and head for the bar where he'd grab a bottle and sit at a table alone, pouring shots and slamming them down. Nobody drank like the Baron. The others just stood at the bar and watched him. One time one of the other fliers said, 'What is it, Himmlen? You think you're too good for us?' It was Willie Schmidt, the biggest, strongest guy in the outfit. The Baron downed his drink, set down his glass, stood up and slowly started walking toward Willie who was standing at the bar. The other fliers backed off.

‘Jesus, what are you going to *do?*’ asked Willie as the Baron advanced.

The Baron kept moving slowly toward Willie, not answering.

‘Jesus, Baron, I was just *kidding!* Mother’s honor! Listen to me, Baron … Baron … the enemy is *elsewhere!* Baron!’

The Baron let go with his right. You couldn’t see it. It smashed into Willie’s face propelling him over the top of the bar, flipping him over completely! He crashed into the bar mirror like a cannonball and the bottles tumbled down. The Baron pulled a cigar out and lit it, then walked back to his table, sat down and poured another drink. They didn’t bother the Baron after that. Behind the bar they picked Willie up. His face was a mass of blood.

The Baron shot plane after plane out of the sky. Nobody seemed to understand him and nobody knew how he had become so skillful with the red Fokker and in his other strange ways. Like fighting. Or the graceful way he walked. He went on and on. His luck was sometimes bad. One day flying back after downing three Allied planes, limping in low over enemy lines, he was hit by shrapnel. It blew off his right hand at the wrist. He managed to bring the red Fokker in. From that time on he flew with an iron hand in place of his original right hand. It didn’t affect his flying. And the fellows at the bar were more careful than ever when they talked to him.

Many more things happened to the Baron after that. Twice he crashed in no-man’s-land and each time he crawled back to his squadron, half-dead, through barbed wire and flares and enemy fire. Many times he was given up for dead by his comrades. Once he was gone for eight days and the other flyers were sitting in the bar, talking about what an exceptional man he had been. When they looked up, there was the Baron standing in the doorway, eight-day beard, uniform torn and muddy, eyes red and bleary, iron hand glinting in the bar light. He stood there and he said, ‘There better be some god-damned whiskey in this place or I’m tearing it apart!’

The Baron went on doing magic things. Half the notebook was filled with Baron Von Himmlen. It made me feel good to write about the Baron. A man needed somebody. There wasn't anybody around, so you had to make up somebody, make him up to be like a man *should* be. It wasn't make-believe or cheating. The other way was make-believe and cheating: living your life without a man like him around.

35

The bandages were helpful. LA County Hospital had finally come up with something. The boils drained. They didn't vanish but they flattened a bit. Yet some new ones would appear and rise up again. They drilled me and wrapped me again.

My sessions with the drill were endless. Thirty-two, thirty-six, thirty-eight times. There was no fear of the drill anymore. There never had been. Only an anger. But the anger was gone. There wasn't even resignation on my part, only disgust, a disgust that this had happened to me, and a disgust with the doctors who couldn't do anything about it. They were helpless and I was helpless, the only difference being that I was the victim. They could go home to their lives and forget while I was stuck with the same face.

But there were changes in my life. My father found a job. He passed an examination at the LA County Museum and got a job as a guard. My father was good at exams. He loved math and history. He passed the exam and finally had a place to go each morning. There had been three vacancies for guards and he had gotten one of them.

LA County General Hospital somehow found out and Miss Ackerman told me one day, 'Henry, this is your last treatment. I'm going to miss you.'

'Aw come on,' I said, 'stop your kidding. You're going to miss me like I'm going to miss that electric needle!'

But she was very strange that day. Those big eyes were watery. I heard her blow her nose.

I heard one of the nurses ask her, 'Why, Janice, what's wrong with you?'

'Nothing. I'm all right.'

Poor Miss Ackerman. I was 15 years old and in love with her and I was covered with boils and there was nothing that either of us could do.

'All right,' she said, 'this is going to be your last ultra-violetray treatment. Lay on your stomach.'

'I know your first name now,' I told her. 'Janice. That's a pretty name. It's just like you.'

'Oh, shut up,' she said.

I saw her once again when the first buzzer sounded. I turned over, Janice re-set the machine and left the room. I never saw her again.

My father didn't believe in doctors who were not free. 'They make you piss in a tube, take your money, and drive home to their wives in Beverly Hills,' he said.

But once he did send me to one. To a doctor with bad breath and a head as round as a basketball, only with two little eyes where a basketball had none. I didn't like my father and the doctor wasn't any better. He said, no fried foods, and to drink carrot juice. That was it.

I would re-enter high school the next term, said my father.

'I'm busting my ass to keep people from stealing. Some nigger broke the glass on a case and stole some rare coins yesterday. I caught the bastard. We rolled down the stairway together. I held him until the others came. I risk my life every day. Why should you sit around on your ass, moping? I want you to be an engineer. How the hell you gonna be an engineer when I find notebooks full of women with their skirts pulled up to their ass? Is *that* all you can draw? Why don't you draw flowers or mountains or the ocean? You're going back to school!'

I drank carrot juice and waited to re-enroll. I had only missed one term. The boils weren't cured but they weren't as bad as they had been.

'You know what carrot juice costs me? I have to work the first hour every day just for your god-damned carrot juice!'

I discovered the La Cienega Public Library. I got a library card. The library was near the old church down on West Adams. It was a very small library and there was just one librarian in it. She was class. About 38 but with pure white hair pulled tightly into a bun behind her neck. Her nose was sharp and she had deep green eyes behind rimless glasses. I felt that she knew everything.

I walked around the library looking for books. I pulled them off the shelves, one by one. But they were all tricks. They were very dull. There were pages and pages of words that didn't say anything. Or if they did say something they took too long to say it and by the time they said it you already were too tired to have it matter at all. I tried book after book. Surely, out of all those books, there was *one*.

Each day I walked down to the library at Adams and La Brea and there was my librarian, stern and infallible and silent. I kept pulling the books off the shelves. The first real book I found was by a fellow named Upton Sinclair. His sentences were simple and he spoke with anger. He wrote with anger. He wrote about the hog pens of Chicago. He came right out and said things plainly. Then I found another author. His name was Sinclair Lewis. And the book was called *Main Street*. He peeled back the layers of hypocrisy that covered people. Only he seemed to lack passion.

I went back for more. I read each book in a single evening.

I was walking around one day sneaking glances at my librarian when I came upon a book with the title *Bow Down To Wood and Stone*. Now, that was good, because that was what we were all doing. At last, some *fire!* I opened the book. It was by Josephine Lawrence. A woman. That was all right. Anybody could find knowledge. I opened the pages. But they were like many of the other books: milky, obscure, tiresome. I replaced the book. And while my hand was there I reached for a book nearby. It was by another Lawrence. I opened the book at random and began reading. It was about a man at a piano. How false it seemed at first. But I kept reading. The man at the piano was troubled. His mind was saying things. Dark and curious things. The lines on the page were pulled tight, like a man screaming, but not 'Joe, where are you?' More like *Joe, where is anything?* This Lawrence of the tight and bloody line. I had never been told about him. Why the secret? Why wasn't he advertised?

I read a book a day. I read all the D. H. Lawrence in the library. My librarian began to look at me strangely as I checked out the books.

'How are you today?' she would ask.

That always sounded so good. I felt as if I had already gone to bed with her. I read all the books by D. H. And they led to others. To H. D., the poetess. And Huxley, the youngest of the Huxleys, Lawrence's friend. It all came rushing at me. One book led to the next. Dos Passos came along. Not too good, really, but good enough. His trilogy, about the USA, took longer than a day to read. Dreiser didn't work for me. Sherwood Anderson did. And then along came Hemingway. What a thrill! He knew how to lay down a line. It was a joy. Words weren't dull, words were things that could make your mind hum. If you read them and let yourself feel the magic, you could live without pain, with hope, no matter what happened to you.

But back at home …

'LIGHTS OUT!' my father would scream.

I was reading the Russians now, reading Turgenev and Gorky.

My father's rule was that all lights were to be out by 8 p.m. He wanted to sleep so that he could be fresh and effective on the job the next day. His conversation at home was always about 'the job.' He talked to my mother about his 'job' from the moment he entered the door in the evenings until they slept. He was determined to rise in the ranks.

'*All right, that's enough of those god-damned books! Lights out!*'

To me, these men who had come into my life from nowhere were my only chance. They were the only voices that spoke to me.

'All right,' I would say.

Then I took the reading lamp, crawled under the blanket, pulled the pillow under there, and read each new book, propping it against the pillow, under the quilt. It got very hot, the lamp got hot, and I had trouble breathing. I would lift the quilt for air.

'*What's that? Do I see a light? Henry, are your lights out?*'

I would quickly lower the quilt again and wait until I heard my father snoring.

Turgenev was a very serious fellow but he could make me laugh because a truth first encountered can be very funny. When someone else’s truth is the same as your truth, and he seems to be saying it just for you, that’s great.

I read my books at night, like that, under the quilt with the overheated reading lamp. Reading all those good lines while suffocating. It was magic.

And my father had found a job, and that was magic for him …

36

Back at Chelsey High it was the same. One group of seniors had graduated but they were replaced by another group of seniors with sports cars and expensive clothes. I was never confronted by them. They left me alone, they ignored me. They were busy with the girls. They never spoke to the poor guys in or out of class.

About a week into my second semester I talked to my father over dinner.

'Look,' I said, 'it's hard at school. You're giving me 50 cents a week allowance. Can't you make it a dollar?'

'A dollar?'

'Yes.'

He put a forkful of sliced pickled beets into his mouth and chewed. Then he looked at me from under his curled-up eyebrows.

'If I gave you a dollar a week that would mean 52 dollars a year, that would mean I would have to work over a *week* on my job just so you could have an allowance.'

I didn't answer. But I thought, my god, if you think like that, item by item, then you can't buy anything: bread, watermelon, newspapers, flour, milk or shaving cream. I didn't say any more because when you hate, you don't beg …

Those rich guys like to dart their cars in and out, swiftly, sliding up, burning rubber, their cars glistening in the sunlight as the girls gathered around. Classes were a joke, they were all going somewhere to college, classes were just a routine laugh, they got good grades, you seldom saw them with books, you just saw them burning more rubber, gunning from the curb with their cars full of squealing and laughing girls. I watched them with my 50 cents in my pocket. I didn't even know how to drive a car.

Meanwhile the poor and the lost and the idiots continued to flock around me. I had a place I liked to eat under the football grandstand. I had my brown-bag lunch with my two Bologna sandwiches. They came around, ‘Hey, Hank, can I eat with you?’

‘Get the fuck out of here! I’m not going to tell you twice!’

Enough of this kind had attached themselves to me already. I didn’t much care for any of them: Baldy, Jimmy Hatcher, and a thin gangling Jewish kid, Abe Mortenson. Mortenson was a straight-A student but one of the biggest idiots in school. He had something radically wrong with him. Saliva kept forming in his mouth but instead of spitting on the ground to get rid of it he spit into his hands. I don’t know why he did it and I didn’t ask. I didn’t like to ask. I just watched him and I was disgusted. I went home with him once and I found out how he got straight A’s. His mother made him stick his nose into a book right away and she made him keep it there. She made him read all of his school books over and over, page after page. ‘He must pass his exams,’ she told me. It never occurred to her that maybe the books were wrong. Or that maybe it didn’t matter. I didn’t ask her.

It was like grammar school all over again. Gathered around me were the weak instead of the strong, the ugly instead of the beautiful, the losers instead of the winners. It looked like it was my destiny to travel in their company through life. That didn’t bother me so much as the fact that I seemed irresistible to these dull idiot fellows. I was like a turd that drew flies instead of like a flower that butterflies and bees desired. I wanted to live alone, I felt best being alone, cleaner, yet I was not clever enough to rid myself of them. Maybe they were *my* masters: fathers in another form. In any event, it was hard to have them hanging around while I was eating my Bologna sandwiches.

37

But there were some good moments. My sometime friend from the neighborhood, Gene, who was a year older than I, had a buddy, Harry Gibson, who had had one professional fight (he'd lost). I was over at Gene's one afternoon smoking cigarettes with him when Harry Gibson showed up with two pairs of boxing gloves. Gene and I were smoking with his two older brothers, Larry and Dan.

Harry Gibson was cocky. 'Anybody want to try me?' he asked. Nobody said anything. Gene's oldest brother, Larry, was about 22. He was the biggest, but he was kind of timid and subnormal. He had a *huge* head, he was short and stocky, really well-built, but everything frightened him. So we all looked at Dan who was the next oldest, since Larry said, 'No, no I don't want to fight.' Dan was a musical genius, he had almost won a scholarship but not quite. Anyhow, since Larry had passed up Harry's challenge, Dan put the gloves on with Harry Gibson.

Harry Gibson was a son-of-a-bitch on shining wheels. Even the sun glinted off his gloves in a certain way. He moved with precision, aplomb and grace. He pranced and danced around Dan. Dan held up his gloves and waited. Gibson's first punch streaked in. It cracked like a rifle shot. There were some chickens in a pen in the yard and two of them jumped into the air at the sound. Dan spilled backwards. He was stretched out on the grass, both of his arms spread out like some cheap Christ.

Larry looked at him and said, 'I'm going into the house.' He walked quickly to the screen door, opened it and was gone.

We walked over to Dan. Gibson stood over him with a little grin on his face. Gene bent down, lifted Dan's head up a bit. 'Dan? You all right?'

Dan shook his head and slowly sat up.

'Jesus Christ, the guy's carrying a lethal weapon. Get these gloves off me!'

Gene unlaced one glove and I got the other. Dan stood up and walked toward the back door like an old man. 'I'm gonna lay down …' He went inside.

Harry Gibson picked up the gloves and looked at Gene. 'How about it, Gene?'

Gene spit in the grass. 'What the hell you trying to do, knock off the whole family?'

'I know you're the best fighter, Gene, but I'll go easy on you anyhow.'

Gene nodded and I laced on his gloves for him. I was a good glove man.

They squared off. Gibson circled around Gene, getting ready. He circled to the right, then he circled to the left. He bobbed and he weaved. Then he stepped in, gave Gene a hard left jab. It landed right between Gene's eyes. Gene backpedaled and Gibson followed. When he got Gene up against the chicken pen he steadied him with a soft left to the forehead and then cracked a hard right to Gene's left temple. Gene slid along the chicken wire until he hit the fence, then he slid along the fence, covering up. He wasn't attempting to fight back. Dan came out of the house with a piece of ice wrapped in a rag. He sat on the porch steps and held the rag to his forehead. Gene retreated along the fence. Harry got him in the corner between the fence and the garage. He looped a left to Gene's gut and when Gene bent over he straightened him with a right uppercut. I didn't like it. Gibson wasn't going easy on Gene like he'd promised. I got excited.

'Hit that fucker back, Gene! He's yellow! Hit him!'

Gibson lowered his gloves, looked at me and walked over. 'What did you say, punk?'

'I was rooting my man on,' I said.

Dan was over getting the gloves off Gene.

'Did I hear something about being "yellow"?'

'You said you were going to go easy on him. You didn't. You're hitting him with every shot you've got.'

'You callin' me a liar?'

‘I’m saying you don’t keep your word.’

‘Come on over and put the gloves on this punk!’

Gene and Dan came over and began putting the gloves on me. ‘Take it easy on this guy, Hank,’ Gene said. ‘Remember he’s all tired out from fighting us.’

Gene and I had fought barefisted one memorable day from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Gene had done pretty good. I had small hands and if you have small hands you’ve either got to be able to hit hard as hell or else be some kind of a boxer. I was only a little of each. The next day my entire upper body was purple with bruises and I had two fat lips and a couple of loose front teeth. Now I had to fight the guy who had just whipped the guy who had whipped me.

Gibson circled to the left, then the right, then he moved in on me. I didn’t see the left jab at all. I don’t know where it caught me but I went down from the left jab. It hadn’t hurt but I was down. I got up. If the left could do that what would the right do? I had to figure something out.

Harry Gibson began to circle to the left, my left. Instead of circling to my right like he expected, I circled to my left. He looked surprised and as we came together I looped a wild left which caught him high and hard on the head. It felt great. If you can hit a guy once, you can hit him twice.

Then we were facing each other and he came straight at me. Gibson got me with the jab but as it hit me I ducked my head down and to one side as quickly as I could. His right swung around over the top, missing. I moved into him and clinched, giving him a rabbit punch. We broke and I felt like a pro.

‘You can take him, Hank!’ yelled Gene.

‘Go get him, Hank!’ yelled Dan.

I rushed Gibson and tried a right lead. I missed and his left cross flashed on my jaw. I saw green and yellow and red lights, then he dug a right to my belly. It felt like it went through to my backbone. I grabbed him and clinched. But I wasn’t frightened, for a change, and that felt good.

‘I’ll kill you, you fucker!’ I told him.

Then it was just head-to-head, no more boxing. His punches came fast and hard. He was more accurate, had more power, yet I was landing some hard shots too and it made me feel good. The more he hit me the less I felt it. I had my gut sucked in, I liked the action. Then Gene and Dan were between us. They pulled us apart.

'What's wrong?' I asked. 'Don't stop this thing! I can take his ass!'

'Cut the shit, Hank,' said Gene. 'Look at yourself.'

I looked down. The front of my shirt was dark with blood and there were splotches of pus. The punches had broken open three or four boils. That hadn't happened in my fight with Gene.

'That's nothing,' I said. 'That's just bad luck. He hasn't hurt me. Give me a chance and I'll cut him down.'

'No, Hank, you'll get an infection or something,' said Gene.

'All right, shit,' I said, 'cut the gloves off me!'

Gene unlaced me. When he got the gloves off I noticed that my hands were trembling, and also my arms to a lesser extent. I put my hands in my pockets. Dan took Harry's gloves off.

Harry looked at me. 'You're pretty good, kid.'

'Thanks. Well, I'll see you guys …'

I walked off. As I walked away I took my hands out of my pockets. Then up the driveway, just at the sidewalk, I stopped, pulled out a cigarette and stuck it into my mouth. When I tried to strike a match my hands were trembling so much I couldn't do it. I gave them a wave, a real nonchalant wave, and walked away.

Back at the house I looked at myself in the mirror. Pretty damn good. I was coming along.

I took off my shirt and threw it under the bed. I'd have to find a way to clean the blood off. I didn't have many shirts and they'd notice a missing one right away. But for me, it had finally been a successful day, and I hadn't had too many of those.

38

Abe Mortenson was bad enough to be around but he was just a fool. You can forgive a fool because he only runs in one direction and doesn't deceive anybody. It's the deceivers who make you feel bad. Jimmy Hatcher had straight black hair, fair skin, he wasn't as big as I was but he kept his shoulders back, dressed better than most of us, and he had a way of getting along with anybody he felt like getting along with. His mother was a bar maid and his father had committed suicide. Jimmy had a nice smile, perfect teeth, and the girls liked him even though he didn't have the money the rich guys had. I would always see him talking to some girl. I don't know what he said to them. I didn't know what any of the guys said to any of them. The girls were impossibly out of reach for me and so I pretended that they didn't exist.

But Hatcher was another matter. I knew he wasn't a fairy but he kept hanging around.

'Listen, Jimmy, why do you follow me around? I don't like anything about you.'

'Ah, come on, Hank, we're friends.'

'Yeah?'

'Yes.'

He even got up once in English class and read an essay called 'The Value of Friendship,' and while he was reading it he kept glancing at me. It was a stupid essay, soft and standard, but the class applauded when he finished, and I thought, well, that's what people think and what can you do about it? I wrote a counter-essay called, 'The Value of No Friendship At All.' The teacher didn't let me read it to the class. She gave me a 'D.'

Jimmy and Baldy and I walked home together from high school each day. (Abe Mortenson lived in the other direction so that saved us from having to walk with him.) One day we were walking along and Jimmy said, 'Hey, let's go to my girlfriend's house. I want you to meet her.'

'Ah, balls, fuck that,' I said.

‘No, no,’ said Jimmy, ‘she’s a nice girl. I want you to meet her. I’ve finger-fucked her.’

I’d seen his girl, Ann Weatherton, she was really beautiful, long brown hair and large brown eyes, quiet, and with a good figure. I’d never spoken to her but I knew she was Jimmy’s girl. The rich guys had tried to hit on her but she ignored them. She looked like she was first-rate.

‘I’ve got the key to her house,’ said Jimmy. ‘We’ll go there and wait for her. She’s got a late class.’

‘Sounds dull to me,’ I said.

‘Ah, come on, Hank,’ said Baldy, ‘you’re just going to go home and whack-off anyhow.’

‘That’s not always without its own merits,’ I said.

Jimmy opened the front door with his key and we walked in. A nice clean little house. A small black and white bulldog ran up to Jimmy, wagging its stub tail.

‘This is Bones,’ said Jimmy. ‘Bones loves me. Watch this!’

Jimmy spit in the palm of his right hand and grabbed Bones’ penis and began rubbing it.

‘Hey, what the fuck you doing?’ asked Baldy.

‘They keep Bones on a leash in the yard. He never gets any. He needs *release!*’ Jimmy worked away.

Bones’ penis got disgustingly red, a thin, long string of dripping inanity. Bones began making whimpering sounds. Jimmy looked up as he worked away. ‘Hey, you wanna know what our song is? I mean, Ann’s song and my song? It’s “When the Deep Purple Falls Over Sleepy Garden Walls.”’

Then Bones was making it. The sperm spurted out and on the carpet. Jimmy stood up and with the sole of his shoe rubbed the come down into the nap of the carpet.

‘I’m gonna fuck Ann one of these days. It’s getting close. She says she loves me. And I love her too, I love her god-damned cunt.’

‘You prick,’ I told Jimmy, ‘you make me sick.’

‘I know you don’t mean that, Hank,’ he said.

Jimmy walked into the kitchen. 'She's got a nice family. She lives here with her father, mother and brother. Her brother knows I am going to fuck her. He's right. But there's nothing he can do about it because I can beat the shit out of him. He's nothing. Hey, watch this!'

Jimmy opened the refrigerator door and pulled out a bottle of milk. At our place we still had an icebox. The Weathertons were obviously a well-off family. Jimmy pulled out his cock and then peeled the cardboard cap off the bottle and put his cock in there.

'Just a little, you know. They'll never taste it but they'll be drinking my piss …'

He pulled his cock out, capped the bottle, shook it, and then placed it back in the refrigerator.

'Now,' he said, 'here's some jello. They are going to eat jello for dessert tonight. They are also going to eat …' He took the bowl of jello out and held it and then we heard a key in the front door and the front door opening. Jimmy quickly put the jello back into the refrigerator and closed the door.

Then Ann walked in. Into the kitchen.

'Ann,' said Jimmy, 'I want you to meet my good friends, Hank and Baldy.'

'Hi!'

'Hi!'

'Hi!'

'*This* one's Baldy. The other guy is Hank.'

'Hi.'

'Hi.'

'Hi.'

'I've seen you guys around campus.'

'Oh yeah,' I said, 'we're around there. And we've seen you too.'

'Yeah,' said Baldy.

Jimmy looked at Ann. 'You all right, baby?'

'Yes. Jimmy, I've been thinking about you.'

She moved toward him and they embraced, then they were kissing. They were standing right in front of us as they were kissing. Jimmy was facing us. We could see his right eye. It winked.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘we’ve got to get going.’

‘Yeah,’ said Baldy.

We walked out of the kitchen, through the front room and out of there. We walked down the sidewalk toward Baldy’s place.

‘That guy’s really got it made,’ said Baldy.

‘Yeah,’ I said.

39

One Sunday Jimmy talked me into going to the beach with him. He wanted to go swimming. I didn't want to be seen wearing swimming trunks because my back was covered with boils and scars. Outside of that, I had a good body. But nobody would notice *that*. I had a good chest and great legs but nobody would see that.

There was nothing to do and I didn't have any money and the guys didn't play in the streets on Sunday. I decided that the beach belonged to everybody. I had a right. My scars and boils weren't against the law.

So we got on our bikes and started out. It was fifteen miles. That didn't bother me. I had the legs.

I breezed with Jimmy all the way to Culver City. Then I gradually began to pedal faster. Jimmy pumped, trying to keep up. I could see him getting winded. I pulled out a cigarette and lit it, held out the pack to him. 'Want one, Jim?'

'No … thanks …'

'This beats shooting birds with a beebee gun,' I told him. 'We ought to do this more often!'

I began pumping harder. I still had plenty of reserve strength.

'This really gets it,' I told him. 'This beats whacking-off!'

'Hey, slow up a little!'

I looked back at him. 'There's nothing like a good friend to go biking with. Come on, friend!'

Then I gave it all I had and pulled away. The wind was blowing in my face. It felt good.

'Hey, wait! WAIT, GOD DAMN IT!' yelled Jimmy.

I started laughing and really opened up. Soon Jim was half-a-block back, a block, two blocks. Nobody knew how good I was, nobody knew what I could do. I was some kind of miracle. The sun tossed yellow everywhere and I cut through it, a crazy knife on wheels. My father was a beggar in the streets of India but all the women in the world loved me …

I was traveling at full speed as I reached the signal. I shot through inside the row of waiting cars. Now even the cars were back there behind me. But not for long. A guy and his girl in a green coupe pulled up and drove alongside me.

'Hey, kid!'

'Yeah?' I looked at him. He was a big guy in his twenties with hairy arms and a tattoo.

'Where the fuck do you think you're going?' he asked me.

He was trying to show off in front of his girl. She was a looker, her long blond hair blowing in the wind.

'Up *yours*, buddy!' I told him.

'*What?*'

'I said, "Up *yours!*"'

I gave him the finger.

He kept driving along beside me.

'You gonna take shit off that kid, Nick?' I heard his girl ask him.

He kept driving along beside me.

'Hey, kid,' he said, 'I didn't quite hear what you said. Would you mind saying that again?'

'Yeah, say that again,' said the looker, her long blond hair blowing in the wind.

That pissed me. She pissed me.

I looked at him. 'All right, you want trouble? *Park it*. I'm trouble.'

He zoomed ahead of me about half a block, parked, and swung the door open. As he got out I swung wide around him almost into the path of a Chevy who gave me the horn. As I swung around into a side street I could hear the big guy laughing.

After the guy was gone I wheeled back onto Washington Boulevard, went a few blocks, got off the bike and waited for Jim on a bus stop bench. I could see him coming along. When he pulled up I pretended that I was asleep.

'Come on, Hank! Don't give me that shit!'

'Oh, hello, Jim. You here?'

I tried to get Jim to pick a spot on the beach where there weren't too many people. I felt normal standing there in my shirt but when I undressed I was exposed. I hated the other bathers for their unmarred bodies. I hated all the god-damned people who were sunbathing or in the water or eating or sleeping or talking or throwing beachballs. I hated their behinds and their faces and their elbows and their hair and their eyes and their bellybuttons and their bathing suits.

I stretched out on the sand thinking, I should have punched that fat son-of-a-bitch. What the hell did he know?

Jim stretched out beside me.

'What the hell,' he said, 'let's go swimming.'

'Not yet,' I said.

The water was full of people. What was the fascination of the beach? Why did people like the beach? Didn't they have anything better to do? What chicken-brained fuckers they were.

'Just think,' said Jim, 'women go into the water and they piss in there.'

'Yeah, and you swallow it.'

There would never be a way for me to live comfortably with people. Maybe I'd become a monk. I'd pretend to believe in God and live in a cubicle, play an organ and stay drunk on wine. Nobody would fuck with me. I could go into a cell for months of meditation where I wouldn't have to look at anybody and they could just send in the wine. The trouble was, the black robes were pure wool. They were worse than ROTC uniforms. I couldn't wear them. I'd have to think of something else.

'Oh, oh,' said Jim.

'What is it?'

'There are some girls down there looking at us.'

'So what?'

'They're talking and laughing. They might come down here.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. And if they start coming over I'll warn you. When I do, turn on your back.'

My chest had only a few boils and scars.

'Don't forget,' said Jim, 'when I warn you, turn over on your back.'

'I heard you.'

I had my head down in my arms. I knew that Jim was looking at the girls and smiling. He had a way with them.

'Simple cunts,' he said, 'they're really stupid.'

Why did I come here? I thought. Why is it always only a matter of choosing between something bad and something worse?

'Oh, oh, Hank, here they come!'

I looked up. There were five of them. I rolled over on my back. They walked up giggling and stood there. One of them said, 'Hey, these guys are cute!'

'You girls live around here?' Jim asked.

'Oh yeah,' one of them said, 'we nest with the seagulls!'

They giggled.

'Well,' said Jim, 'we're eagles. I'm not sure we'd know what to do with five seagulls.'

'How do birds do it anyhow?' one of them asked.

'Damned if I know,' Jim said, 'maybe we can find out.'

'Why don't you guys come over to our blanket?' one of them asked.

'Sure,' Jim said.

Three of the girls had spoken. The other two had just stood there pulling their bathing suits down over what they didn't want seen.

'Count me out,' I said.

'What's wrong with your friend?' asked one of the girls who had been covering her ass.

Jim said, 'He's strange.'

'What's wrong with him?' asked the last girl.

'He's just strange,' said Jim.

He got up and walked off with the girls. I closed my eyes and listened to the waves. Thousands of fish out there, eating each other. Endless mouths and assholes swallowing and shitting.

The whole earth was nothing but mouths and assholes swallowing and shitting, and fucking.

I rolled over and watched Jim with the five girls. He was standing up, sticking his chest out and showing off his balls. He didn't have my barrel chest and big legs. He was slim and neat, with that black hair and that little nasty mouth with perfect teeth, and his little round ears and his long neck. I didn't have a neck. Not much of one, anyway. My head seemed to sit on my shoulders. But I was strong, and mean. Not good enough, the ladies liked dandies. If it wasn't for the boils and scars, though, I'd be down there now showing them a thing or two. I'd flash my balls for them, bringing their dead air-headed minds to attention. Me, with my 50-cents-a-week life.

Then I saw the girls leap up and follow Jim into the water. I heard them giggling and screaming like mindless … what? No, they were nice. They weren't like grown-ups and parents. They laughed. Things were funny. They weren't afraid to care. There was no sense to life, to the structure of things. D. H. Lawrence had known that. You needed love, but not the kind of love most people used and were used up by. Old D. H. had known something. His buddy Huxley was just an intellectual fidget, but what a marvelous one. Better than G. B. Shaw with that hard keel of a mind always scraping bottom, his labored wit finally only a task, a burden on himself, preventing him from really feeling anything, his brilliant speech finally a bore, scraping the mind and the sensibilities. It was good to read them all though. It made you realize that thoughts and words could be fascinating, if finally useless.

Jim was splashing water on the girls. He was the Water God and they loved him. He was the possibility and the promise. He was great. He knew how to do it. I had read many books but he had read a book that I had never read. He was an artist with his little pair of bathing trunks and his balls and his wicked little look and his round ears. He was the best. I couldn't challenge him any more than I could have challenged that big son-of-a-bitch in the green coupe with the looker whose hair flowed in the wind. They both had got what they deserved. I was just a 50-cent turd floating around in the green ocean of life.

I watched them come out of the water, glistening, smooth-skinned and young, undefeated. I wanted them to want me. But never out of pity. Yet, despite their smooth untouched bodies and minds they still were missing something because they were as yet basically untested. When adversity finally arrived in their lives it might come too late or too hard. I was ready. Maybe.

I watched Jim toweling off, using one of their towels. As I watched, somebody's child, a boy of about four came along, picked up a handful of sand and threw it in my face. Then he just stood there, glowering, his sandy stupid little mouth puckered in some kind of victory. He was a daring darling little shit. I wiggled my finger for him to come closer, come, come. He stood there.

'Little boy,' I said, 'come here. I have a bag of candy-covered shit for you to eat.'

The fucker looked, turned and ran off. He had a stupid ass. Two little pear-shaped buttocks wobbling, almost disjointed. But, another enemy gone.

Then Jim, the lady killer, was back. He stood there over me. Glowering also.

'They're gone,' he said.

I looked down to where the five girls had been and sure enough they were gone.

'Where did they go?' I asked.

'Who gives a fuck? I've got the phone numbers of the two best ones.'

'Best ones for what?'

'For *fucking*, you jerk!'

I stood up.

'I think I'll deck you, jerk!'

His face looked good in the sea wind. I could already see him, knocked down, squirming on the sand, kicking up his white-bottomed feet.

Jim backed off.

‘Take it easy, Hank. Look, you can have their phone numbers!’

‘Keep them. I don’t have your god-damned dumb ears!’

‘OK, OK, we’re friends, remember?’

We walked up the beach to the strand where we had our bicycles locked behind someone’s beach house. And as we walked along we both knew whose day it had been, and knocking somebody on their ass could not have changed that, although it might have helped, but not enough. All the way home, on our bikes, I didn’t try to show him up as I had earlier. I needed something more. Maybe I needed that blonde in the green coupe with her long hair blowing in the wind.

40

ROTC was for the misfits. Like I said, it was either that or gym. I would have taken gym but I didn’t want people to see the boils on my back. There was something wrong with everybody enrolled in ROTC. It almost entirely consisted of guys who didn’t like sports or guys whose parents forced them to take ROTC because they thought it was patriotic. The parents of rich kids tended to be more patriotic because they had more to lose if the country went under. The poor parents were far less patriotic, and then often professed their patriotism only because it was expected or because it was the way they had been raised. Subconsciously they knew it wouldn’t be any better or worse for *them* if the Russians or the Germans or the Chinese or the Japanese ran the country, especially if they had dark skin. Things might even improve. Anyhow, since many of the parents of Chelsey High were rich, we had one of the biggest ROTC’s in the city.

So we marched around in the sun and learned to dig latrines, cure snake-bite, tend the wounded, tie tourniquets, bayonet the enemy; we learned about hand grenades, infiltration, deployment of troops, maneuvers, retreats, advances, mental and physical discipline; we got on the firing range, bang bang, and we got our marksmen’s medals. We had actual field maneuvers, we went out into the woods and waged a mock war. We crawled on our bellies toward each other with our rifles. We were very serious. Even I was serious. There was something about it that got your blood going. It was stupid and we all knew it was stupid, most of us, but something clicked in our brains and we really wanted to get involved in it. We had an old retired army man, Col Sussex. He was getting senile and drooled, little trickles of saliva running out of the corners of his mouth and down, around and under his chin. He never said anything. He just stood around in his uniform covered with medals and drew his pay from the high school. During our mock maneuvers he carried around a clipboard and kept score.

He stood on a high hill and made marks on the clipboard – probably. But he never told us who won. Each side claimed victory. It made for bad feelings.

Lt Herman Beechcroft was best. His father owned a bakery and a hotel catering service, whatever that was. Anyhow, he was best. He always gave the same speech before a maneuver.

'Remember, you must *hate* the enemy! They want to rape your mother and sisters! Do you want those monsters to rape your mother and sisters?'

Lt Beechcroft had almost no chin at all. His face dropped away suddenly and where the jaw bone should have been there was only a little button. We weren't sure if it was a deformity or not. But his eyes were magnificent in their fury, large blue blazing symbols of war and victory.

'*Whitlinger!*'

'Yes, sir!'

'Would you want those guys raping your mother?'

'My mother's dead, sir.'

'Oh, sorry … *Drake!*'

'Yes, sir!'

'Would you want those guys raping your mother?'

'*No, sir!*'

'Good. Remember, this is *war!* We accept mercy but we do not give mercy. You must hate the enemy. *Kill him!* A dead man can't defeat you. Defeat is a disease! Victory writes history! NOW LET'S GO GET THOSE COCKSUCKERS!'

We deployed our line, sent out the advance scouts and began crawling through the brush. I could see Col Sussex on his hill with his clipboard. It was the Blues vs the Greens. We each had a piece of colored rag tied around our upper right arm. We were the Blues. Crawling through those bushes was pure hell. It was hot. There were bugs, dust, rocks, thorns. I didn't know where I was. Our squad leader, Kozak, had vanished somewhere. There was no communication. We were fucked. Our mothers were going to get raped. I kept crawling forward, bruising and scratching myself, feeling lost and scared, but really feeling more the fool. All this vacant land and empty sky, hills, streams, acres and acres. Who owned it all? Probably the father of one of the rich guys. We weren't going to capture anything. The whole place was on loan to the high school. NO SMOKING. I crawled forward. We had no air cover, no tanks, nothing. We were just a bunch of fairies out on a half-assed maneuver without food, without women, without reason. I stood up, walked over and sat down with my back against a tree, put my rifle down and waited.

Everybody was lost and it didn't matter. I pulled my arm band off and waited for a Red Cross Ambulance or something. War was probably hell but the in-between parts were boring.

Then the bushes cracked open and a guy leaped out and saw me. He had on a Green arm-band. A rapist. He pointed his rifle at me. I had no arm band on, it was down in the grass. He wanted to take a prisoner. I knew him. He was Harry Missions. His father owned a lumber company. I sat there against the tree.

'Blue or Green?' he hollered at me.

'I'm Mata Hari.'

'A spy! I take spies!'

'Come on, cut the shit, Harry. This is a game for children. Don't bother me with your fetid melodrama.'

The bushes cracked open again and there was Lt Beechcroft. Missions and Beechcroft faced each other.

'I hereby take you prisoner!' screamed Beechcroft at Missions.

'I hereby take you prisoner!' screamed Missions at Beechcroft.

They both were really nervous and angry, I could feel it.

Beechcroft drew his sabre. 'Surrender or I'll run you through!'

Missions grabbed his gun by the barrel. 'Come over here and I'll knock your god-damned head off!'

Then the bushes cracked open everywhere. The screaming had attracted both the Blues and the Greens. I sat against the tree while they mixed it up. There was dust and scuffling and now and then the evil sound of rifle stock against skull. 'Oh, Jesus! Oh, my God!' Some bodies were down. Rifles were lost.

There were fist fights and headlocks. I saw two guys with Green arm-bands locked in a death-grip. Then Col Sussex appeared. He blew frantically on his whistle. Spit sprayed everywhere. Then he ran over with his swagger stick and began beating the troops with it. He was good. It cut like a whip and sliced like a razor.

'Oh shit! I QUIT!'

'No, *stop!* Jesus! Mercy!'

'Mother!'

The troops separated and stood looking at each other. Col Sussex picked up his clipboard. His uniform was unwrinkled. His medals were still in place. His cap sat at the correct angle. He flipped his swagger stick, caught it, and walked off. We followed.

We climbed into the old army trucks with their ripped canvas sides and tops that had brought us. The engines started and we drove off. We faced each other on the long wooden benches. We had come out, all the Blues in one of the trucks, all the Greens in the other. Now we were mixed together, sitting there, most of us looking down at our scuffed and dusty shoes, being jiggled this way and that, to the left, to the right, up and down, as the truck tires hit the ruts in the old roads. We were tired and we were defeated and we were frustrated. The war was over.

41

ROTC kept me away from sports while the other guys practiced every day. They made the school teams, won their letters and got the girls. My days were spent mostly marching around in the sun. All you ever saw were the backs of some guy's ears and his buttocks. I quickly became disenchanted with military proceedings. The others shined their shoes brightly and seemed to go through maneuvers with relish. I couldn't see any sense in it. They were just getting shaped up in order to get their balls blown off later. On the other hand, I couldn't see myself crouched down in a football helmet, shoulder pads laced on, decked out in Blue and White, #69, trying to block some mean son-of-a-bitch from across town, trying to move out some brute with tacos on his breath so that the son of the district attorney could slant off left tackle for six yards. The problem was you had to keep choosing between one evil or another, and no matter what you chose, they sliced a little bit more off you, until there was nothing left. At the age of 25 most people were finished. A whole god-damned nation of assholes driving automobiles, eating, having babies, doing everything in the worst way possible, like voting for the presidential candidate who reminded them most of themselves.

I had no interests. I had no interest in anything. I had no idea how I was going to escape. At least the others had some taste for life. They seemed to understand something that I didn't understand. Maybe I was lacking. It was possible. I often felt inferior. I just wanted to get away from them. But there was no place to go. Suicide? Jesus Christ, just more work. I felt like sleeping for five years but they wouldn't let me.

So there I was, at Chelsey High, still in the ROTC, still with my boils. That always reminded me of how fucked-up I was.

It was a grand day. One man from each squad who had won the Manual of Arms competition within his squad stepped into a long line where the final competition was to be held.

Somehow I had won the competition in my squad. I had no idea how. I was no hot shot.

It was Saturday. Many mothers and fathers were in the stands. Somebody blew a bugle. A sword flashed. Commands rang out. Right shoulder arms! Left shoulder arms! Rifles hit shoulders, rifle butts hit the ground, rifle stocks slammed into shoulders again. Little girls sat in the stands in their blue and green and yellow and orange and pink and white dresses. It was hot, it was boring, it was insanity.

'Chinaski, you are competing for the honor of our squadron!'

'Yes, Corporal Monty.'

All those little girls in the stands each waiting for her lover, for her winner, for her corporate executive. It was sad. A flock of pigeons, frightened by a piece of paper blown in the wind, flapped noisily away. I yearned to be drunk on beer. I wanted to be anywhere but here.

As each man made an error he dropped out of line. Soon there were six, then five, then three. I was still there. I had no desire to win. I knew that I wouldn't win. I'd soon be out of it. I wanted to be out of there. I was tired and bored. And covered with boils. I didn't give cream-shit for what they were chasing. But I couldn't make an obvious error. Corporal Monty would be hurt.

Then there were just two of us. Me and Andrew Post. Post was a darling. His father was a great criminal lawyer. He was in the stands with his wife, Andrew's mother. Post was sweating but determined. We both knew that he would win. I could feel the energy and all the energy was his.

It's all right, I thought, he needs it, they need it. It's the way it works. It's the way it's meant to work.

We went on and on, repeating various Manual of Arms maneuvers. From the corner of my eye I saw the goal posts on the field and I thought, maybe if I had tried harder I could have become a great football player.

'ORDER!' shouted the Commander and I ripped my bolt home. There had been only one click. There had been no click to my left. Andrew Post had frozen. A little moan rose from the grandstands.

'ARMS!' the Commander finished and I completed the maneuver. Post did too but his bolt was open …

The actual ceremony for the winner came some days later. Luckily for me there were other awards to be given. I stood and waited with the others as Col Sussex came down the line. My boils were worse than ever and as always when I was wearing that itchy brown wool uniform the sun was up and hot and making me conscious of every wool fiber in that son-of-a-bitching shirt. I wasn't much of a soldier and everybody knew it. I had won on a fluke because I hadn't cared enough to be nervous. I felt badly for Col Sussex because I knew what he was thinking and maybe he knew what I was thinking: that his peculiar type of devotion and courage didn't seem exceptional to me.

Then he was standing right in front of me. I stood at attention but managed to sneak a peek at him. He had his saliva in good order. Maybe when he was pissed-off it dried up. In spite of the heat there was a good west wind blowing. Col Sussex pinned the medal on me. Then he reached out and shook my hand.

'Congratulations,' he said. Then he smiled at me. And moved on.

Why the old fuck. Maybe he wasn't so bad after all …

Walking home I had the medal in my pocket. Who was Col Sussex? Just some guy who had to shit like the rest of us. Everybody had to conform, find a mold to fit into. Doctor, lawyer, soldier – it didn't matter what it was. Once in the mold you had to push forward. Sussex was as helpless as the next man. Either you managed to do something or you starved in the streets.

I was alone, walking. On my side of the street just before reaching the first boulevard on the long walk home there was a small neglected store. I stopped and looked in the window. Various objects were on display with their soiled price tags. I saw some candle holders. There was an electric toaster. A table lamp. The glass of the window was dirty inside and out. Through the rather dusty brown smear I saw two toy dogs grinning. A miniature piano. These things were for sale. They didn't look very appealing. There weren't any customers in the store and I couldn't see a clerk either. It was a place I had passed many times before but had never stopped to examine.

I looked in and I liked it. There was nothing happening there. It was a place to rest, to sleep. Everything in there was dead. I could see myself happily employed as a clerk there so long as no customers entered the door.

I turned away from the window and walked along some more. Just before reaching the boulevard I stepped into the street and saw an enormous storm drain almost at my feet. It was like a great black mouth leading down to the bowels of the earth. I reached into my pocket and took the medal and tossed it toward the black opening. It went right in. It disappeared into the darkness.

Then I stepped onto the sidewalk and walked back home. When I got there my parents were busy with various cleaning chores. It was a Saturday. Now I had to mow and clip the lawn, water it and the flowers.

I changed into my working clothes, went out, and with my father watching me from beneath his dark and evil eyebrows, I opened the garage doors and carefully pulled the mower out backwards, the mower blades not turning then, but waiting.

42

'You ought to try to be like Abe Mortenson,' said my mother, 'he gets straight A's. Why can't you ever get any A's?'

'Henry is dead on his ass,' said my father. 'Sometimes I can't believe he's my son.'

'Don't you *want* to be happy, Henry?' asked my mother. 'You never smile. Smile and be happy.'

'Stop feeling sorry for yourself,' said my father. 'Be a man!'

'Smile, Henry!'

'What's going to become of you? How the hell you going to make it? You don't have any get up and go!'

'Why don't you go see Abe? Talk to him, learn to be like him,' said my mother …

I knocked on the door of the Mortensons' apartment. The door opened. It was Abe's mother.

'You can't see Abe. He's busy studying.'

'I know, Mrs Mortenson. I just want to see him a minute.'

'All right. His room is right down there.'

I walked on down. He had his own desk. He was sitting with a book open on top of two other books. I knew the book by the color of the cover: Civics. Civics, for Christ sake, on a Sunday.

Abe looked up and saw me. He spit on his hands and then turned back to the book. 'Hi,' he said, looking down at the page.

'I bet you've read that same page ten times over, sucker.'

'I've got to memorize everything.'

'It's just crap.'

'I've got to pass my tests.'

'You ever thought of fucking a girl?'

'What?' he spit on his hands.

'You ever looked up a girl's dress and wanted to see more? Ever thought about her snatch?'

'That's not important.'

'It's important to her.'

'I've got to study.'

‘We’re having a pick-up game of baseball. Some of the guys from school.’

‘On Sunday?’

‘What’s wrong with Sunday? People do a lot of things on Sunday.’

‘But baseball?’

‘The pros play on Sunday.’

‘But they get paid.’

‘Are you getting paid for reading that same page over and over? Come on, get some air in your lungs, it might clear your head.’

‘All right. But just for a little while.’

He got up and I followed him up the hall and into the front room. We walked toward the door.

‘Abe, where are you going?’

‘I’ll just be gone a little while.’

‘All right. But hurry back. You’ve got to study.’

‘I know …’

‘All right, Henry, you make sure he gets back.’

‘I’ll take care of him, Mrs Mortenson.’

There was Baldy and Jimmy Hatcher and some other guys from school and a few guys from the neighborhood. We only had seven guys on each side which left a couple of defensive holes, but I liked that. I played center field. I had gotten good, I was catching up. I covered most of the outfield. I was fast. I liked to play in close to grab the short ones. But what I liked best was running back to grab those high hard ones hit over my head. That’s what Jigger Statz did with the Los Angeles Angels. He only hit about .280 but the hits he took away from the other team made him as valuable as a .500 hitter.

Every Sunday a dozen or more girls from the neighborhood would come and watch us. I ignored them. They really screamed when something exciting happened. We played hardball and we each had our own glove, even Mortenson. He had the best one. It had hardly been used.

I trotted out to center and the game began. We had Abe at second base. I slammed my fist into my mitt and hollered in at Mortenson, ‘Hey, Abe, you ever jacked-off into a raw egg? You don’t have to die to go to heaven!’

I heard the girls laughing.

The first guy struck out. He wasn’t much. I struck out a lot too but I was the hardest hitter of them all. I could really put the wood to it: out of the lot and into the street. I always crouched low over the plate. I looked like a wound-up spring standing there.

Each moment of the game was exciting to me. All the games I had missed mowing that lawn, all those early school days of being chosen next-to-last were over. I had blossomed. I had something and I knew I had it and it felt good.

‘Hey, Abe!’ I yelled in. ‘With all that spit you don’t need a raw egg!’

The next guy connected hard with one but it was high, very high and I ran back to make an over-the-shoulder catch. I sprinted back, feeling great, knowing that I would create the miracle once again.

Shit. The ball sailed into a tall tree at the back of the lot. Then I saw the ball bouncing down through the branches. I stationed myself and waited. No good, it was going left. I ran left. Then it bounced back to the right. I ran right. It hit a branch, lingered there, then slithered through some leaves and dropped into my glove.

The girls screamed.

I fired the ball into our pitcher on one bounce then trotted back into shallow center. The next guy struck out. Our pitcher, Harvey Nixon, had a good fireball.

We changed sides and I was first up. I had never seen the guy on the mound. He wasn’t from Chelsey. I wondered where he was from. He was big all over, big head, big mouth, big ears, big body. His hair fell down over his eyes and he looked like a fool. His hair was brown and his eyes were green and those green eyes stared at me through that hair as if he hated me. It looked like his left arm was longer than his right. His left arm was his pitching arm. I'd never faced a lefty, not in hardball. But they could all be had. Turn them upside down and they were all alike.

'Kitten' Floss, they called him. Some kitten. 190 pounds.

'Come on, Butch, hit one out!' one of the girls pleaded.

They called me 'Butch' because I played a good game and ignored them.

The Kitten looked at me from between his big ears. I spit on the plate, dug in and waved my bat.

The Kitten nodded like he was getting a signal from the catcher. He was just showboating. Then he looked around the infield. More showboating. It was for the benefit of the girls. He couldn't keep his pecker-mind off of snatch-thoughts.

He took his wind-up. I watched that ball in his left hand. My eyes never left that ball. I had learned the secret. You concentrated on the ball and followed it all the way in until it reached the plate and then you murdered it with the wood.

I watched the ball leave his fingers through a blaze of sun. It was a murderous humming blur, but it could be had. It was below my knees and far out of the strike zone. His catcher had to dive to get it.

'Ball one,' mumbled the old neighborhood fart who umpired our games. He was a night watchman in a department store and he liked to talk to the girls. 'I got two daughters at home just like you girls. Real cute. They wear tight dresses too.' He liked to crouch over the plate and show them his big buttocks. That's all he had, that and one gold tooth.

The catcher threw the ball back to Kitten Floss.

'Hey, Pussy!' I yelled out to him.

'You talkin' to me?'

'I'm talking to you, short-arm. You gotta come closer than that or I'll have to call a cab.'

'The next one is all yours,' he told me.

'Good,' I said. I dug in.

He went through his routine again, nodding like he was getting a sign, checking the infield. Those green eyes stared at me through that dirty brown hair. I watched him wind-up. I saw the ball leave his fingers, a dark fleck against the sky in the sun and then suddenly it was zooming toward my skull. I dropped in my tracks, feeling it brush the hair of my head.

'Strike one,' mumbled the old fart.

'What?' I yelled. The catcher was still holding the ball. He was as surprised at the call as I was. I took the ball from him and showed it to the umpire.

'What's this?' I asked him.

'It's a baseball.'

'Fine. Remember what it looks like.'

I took the ball and walked out to the mound. The green eyes didn't flinch under the dirty hair. But the mouth opened up just a bit, like a frog sucking air.

I walked up to Kitten.

'I don't swing with my head. The next time you do that I am going to jam this thing right up through your shorts and past where you forget to wipe.'

I handed him the ball and walked back to the plate. I dug in and waved my bat.

'One and one,' said the old fart.

Floss kicked dirt around on the mound. He stared off into left field. There was nothing out there except a starving dog scratching his ear. Floss looked in for a sign. He was thinking of the girls, trying to look good. The old fart crouched low, spreading his dumb buttocks, also trying to look good. I was probably one of the few with his mind on the business at hand.

The time came, Kitten Floss went into his wind-up. That left hand windmill could panic you if you let it. You had to be patient and wait for the ball. Finally they had to let it go. Then it was yours to destroy and the harder they threw it in the harder you could hit it out of there.

I saw the ball leave his fingers as one of the girls screamed. Floss hadn't lost his zip. The ball looked like a bee-bee, only it got larger and it was headed right for my skull again. All I knew was that I was trying to find the dirt as fast as I could. I got a mouthful.

'SEERIKE TWO!' I heard the old fart yell. He couldn't even pronounce the word. Get a man who works for nothing and you get a man who just likes to hang around.

I got up and brushed the dirt off. It was even down in my shorts. My mother was going to ask me, 'Henry, how did you ever get your shorts so dirty? Now don't make that face. Smile, and be happy!'

I walked to the mound. I stood right there. Nobody said anything. I just looked at Kitten. I had the bat in my hand. I took the bat by the end and pressed it against his nose. He slapped it away. I turned and walked back toward the plate. Halfway there I stopped. I turned and stared at him again. Then I walked to the plate.

I dug in and waved my bat. This one was going to be mine. The Kitten peered in for the non-existent sign. He looked a long time, then shook his head, no. He kept staring through that dirty hair with those green eyes.

I waved my bat more powerfully.

'*Hit it out, Butch!*' screamed one of the girls.

'*Butch! Butch! Butch!*' screamed another girl.

Then the Kitten turned his back on us and just stared out into center field.

'Time,' I said and stepped out of the box. There was a very cute girl in an orange dress. Her hair was blond and it hung straight down, like a yellow waterfall, beautiful, and I caught her eye for a moment and she said, 'Butch, please do it.'

'Shut up,' I said and stepped back into the box.

The pitch came. I saw it all the way. It was my pitch. Unfortunately, I was looking for the duster. I wanted the duster so I could go out to the mound and kill or be killed. The ball sailed right over the center of the plate. By the time I adjusted the best I could do was swing weakly over the top of it as it went by.

The bastard had suckered me all the way.

He got me on three straight strikes next time. I swear he must have been at least 23 years old. Probably a semi-pro.

One of our guys finally did get a single off him.

But I was good in the field. I made some catches. I moved out there. I knew that the more I saw of the Kitten's fireball the more I was apt to solve it. He wasn't trying to knock out my brains anymore. He didn't have to. He was just smoking them down the middle. I hoped it was only a matter of time before I golfed one out of there.

But things got worse and worse. I didn't like it. The girls didn't either. Not only was green eyes great on the mound, he was great at the plate. The first two times up he hit a homer and a double. The third time up he swung undera pitch-and looped a high blooper between Abe at second base and me in center field. I came charging in, the girls screaming, but Abe kept looking up and back over his shoulder, his mouth drooping down, looking up, looking like a fool really, that wet mouth open. I came charging in screaming, 'It's mine!' It was really his but somehow I couldn't bear to let him make the catch. The guy was nothing but an idiot book-reader and I didn't really like him so I came charging in very hard as the ball dropped. We crashed into one another, the ball popped out of his glove and into the air as he fell to the ground, and I caught the ball off his glove.

I stood there over him as he lay on the ground.

'Get up, you dumb bastard,' I told him.

Abe stayed on the ground. He was crying. He was holding his left arm.

'I think my arm is broken,' he said.

'Get up, chickenshit.'

Abe finally got up and walked off the field, crying and holding his arm.

I looked around. 'All right,' I said, 'let's play ball!'

But everybody was walking away, even the girls. The game was evidently over. I hung around awhile and then I started walking home …

Just before dinner the phone rang. My mother answered it. Her voice became very excited. She hung up and I heard her talking to my father.

Then she came into my bedroom.

‘Please come to the front room,’ she said.

I walked in and sat on the couch. They each had a chair. It was always that way. Chairs meant you belonged. The couch was for visitors.

‘Mrs Mortenson just phoned. They’ve taken x-rays. You broke her son’s arm.’

‘It was an accident,’ I said.

‘She says she is going to sue us. She’ll get a Jewish lawyer. They’ll take everything we have.’

‘We don’t have very much.’

My mother was one of those silent criers. As she cried the tears came faster and faster. Her cheeks were starting to glisten in the evening twilight.

She wiped her eyes. They were a dull light brown.

‘Why did you break that boy’s arm?’

‘It was a pop-up. We both went for it.’

‘What is this “pop-up”?’

‘Whoever gets it, gets it.’

‘So you got the “pop-up”?’

‘Yes.’

‘But how can this “pop-up” help us? The Jewish lawyer will still have the broken arm on his side.’

I got up and walked back to my bedroom to wait for dinner. My father hadn’t said anything. He was confused. He was worried about losing what little he had but at the same time he was very proud of a son who could break somebody’s arm.

43

Jimmy Hatcher worked part-time in a grocery store. While none of us could get jobs he could always get one. He had his little movie-star face and his mother had a great body. With his face and her body he didn't have trouble finding employment.

'Why don't you come up to the apartment after dinner tonight?' he asked me one day.

'What for?'

'I steal all the beer I want. I take it out the back. We can drink the beer.'

'Where you got it?'

'In the refrigerator.'

'Show me.'

We were about a block away from his place. We walked over. In the hallway Jimmy said, 'Wait a minute, I've got to check the mail.' He took out his key and opened the lock box. It was empty. He locked it again.

'My key opens this woman's box. Watch.'

Jimmy opened the box and pulled out a letter and opened it. He read the letter to me. 'Dear Betty: I know that this check is late and that you've been waiting for it. I lost my job. I have found another one, but it put me behind. Here's the check, finally. I hope that everything is all right with you. Love, Don.'

Jimmy took the check and looked at it. He tore it up and he tore the letter up and he put the pieces in his coat pocket. Then he locked the mailbox.

'Come on.'

We went into his apartment and into the kitchen and he opened the refrigerator. It was packed with cans of beer.

'Does your mother know?'

'Sure. She drinks it.'

He closed the refrigerator.

'Jim, did your father really blow his brains out because of your mother?'

‘Yeah. He was on the telephone. He told her he had a gun. He said, “If you don’t come back to me I’m going to kill myself. Will you come back to me?” And my mother said, “No.” There was a shot and that was that.’

‘What did your mother do?’

‘She hung up.’

‘All right, I’ll see you tonight.’

I told my parents that I was going over to Jimmy’s to do some homework with him. My kind of homework, I thought to myself.

‘Jimmy’s a nice boy,’ my mother said.

My father didn’t say anything.

Jimmy got the beer out and we began. I really liked it. Jimmy’s mother worked at a bar until 2 a.m. We had the place to ourselves.

‘Your mother really has a body, Jim. How come some women have great bodies and most of the others look like they’re deformed? Why can’t all women have great bodies?’

‘God, I don’t know. Maybe if women were all the same we’d get bored with them.’

‘Drink some more. You drink too slow.’

‘OK.’

‘Maybe after a few beers I’ll beat the shit out of you.’

‘We’re friends, Hank.’

‘I don’t have any friends. Drink up!’

‘All right. What’s the hurry?’

‘You’ve got to slam them down to get the effect.’

We opened some more cans of beer.

‘If I was a woman I’d go around with my skirt hiked up giving all the men hard-ons,’ Jimmy said.

‘You make me sick.’

‘My mother knew a guy who drank her piss.’

‘What?’

‘Yeah. They’d drink all night and then he’d lay down in the bathtub and she’d piss in his mouth. Then he’d give her twenty-five dollars.’

‘She told you that?’

‘Since my father died she confides in me. It’s like I’ve taken his place.’

‘You mean …?’

‘Oh, no. She just confides.’

‘Like the guy in the tub?’

‘Yeah, like him.’

‘Tell me some more stuff.’

‘No.’

‘Come on, drink up. Does anybody eat your mother’s shit?’

‘Don’t talk that way.’

I finished the can of beer in my hand and threw it across the room.

‘I like this joint. I might move in here.’

I walked to the refrigerator and brought back a new six-pack.

‘I’m one tough son-of-a-bitch,’ I said. ‘You’re lucky I let you hang around me.’

‘We’re friends, Hank.’

I jammed a can of beer under his nose.

‘Here, drink this!’

I went to the bathroom to piss. It was a very ladylike bathroom, brightly-colored towels, deep-pink floormats. Even the toilet seat was pink. She sat her big white ass on there and her name was Clare. I looked at my virgin cock.

‘I’m a man,’ I said. ‘I can whip anybody’s ass.’

‘I need the bathroom, Hank …’ Jim was at the door.

He went into the bathroom. I heard him puking.

‘Ah, shit …’ I said and opened a new can of beer.

After a few minutes, Jim came out and sat in a chair. He looked very pale. I stuck a can of beer under his nose.

‘Drink up! Be a man! You were man enough to steal it, now be man enough to drink it!’

‘Just let me rest a while.’

‘Drink it!’

I sat down on the couch. Getting drunk was good. I decided that I would always like getting drunk. It took away the obvious and maybe if you could get away from the obvious often enough, you wouldn't become obvious yourself.

I looked over at Jimmy.

'Drink up, punk.'

I threw my empty beer can across the room.

'Tell me some more about your mother, Jimmy boy. What did she say about the man who drank her piss in the bathtub?'

'She said, "There's a sucker born every minute."'

'Jim.'

'Uh?'

'Drink up. Be a man!'

He lifted his beer can. Then he ran to the bathroom and I heard him puking again. He came out after a while and sat in his chair. He didn't look well. 'I've got to lay down,' he said.

'Jimmy,' I said, 'I'm going to wait around until your mother comes home.'

Jimmy got up from his chair and started walking toward the bedroom.

'When she comes home I'm going to fuck her, Jimmy.'

He didn't hear me. He just walked into the bedroom.

I went into the kitchen and came back with more beer.

I sat and drank the beer and waited for Clare. Where *was* that whore? I couldn't allow this kind of thing. I ran a tight ship.

I got up and walked into the bedroom. Jim was face down on the bed, all his clothes on, his shoes on. I walked back out.

Well, it was obvious that boy had no belly for booze. Clare needed a man. I sat down and opened another can of beer. I took a good hit. I found a pack of cigarettes on the coffee table and lit one.

I don't know how many more beers I drank waiting for Clare but finally I heard the key in the door and it opened. There was Clare of the body and the bright blond hair. That body stood on those high heels and it swayed just a little. No artist could have imagined it better. Even the walls stared at her, the lampshades, the chairs, the rug. Magic. Standing there …

'Who the hell are you? What is this?'

'Clare, we've met. I'm Hank. Jimmy's friend.'

'Get out of here!'

I laughed. 'I'm movin' in, baby, it's you and me!'

'Where's Jimmy?'

She ran into the bedroom, then came back out.

'You little prick! What's going on here?'

I picked up a cigarette, lit it. I grinned.

'You're beautiful when you're angry …'

'You're nothing but a god-damned little kid drunk on beer. Go home.'

'Sit down, baby. Have a beer.'

Clare sat down. I was very surprised when she did that.

'You go to Chelsey, don't you?' she asked.

'Yeah. Jim and I are buddies.'

'You're Hank.'

'Yes.'

'He's told me about you.'

I handed Clare a can of beer. My hand shook. 'Here, have a drink, baby.'

She opened the beer and took a sip.

I looked at Clare, lifted my beer and had a hit. She was plenty of woman, a Mae West type, wore the same kind of tight-fitting gown – big hips, big legs. And breasts. Startling breasts.

Clare crossed her wondrous legs, a bit of skirt falling back. Her legs were full and golden and the stockings fit like skin.

'I've met your mother,' she said.

I drained my can of beer and put it down by my feet. I opened a new one, took a sip, then looked at her, not knowing whether to look at her breasts or at her legs or into her tired face.

'I'm sorry that I got your son drunk. But I've got to tell you something.'

She turned her head, lighting a cigarette as she did so, then faced me again.

'Yes?'

'Clare, I love you.'

She didn't laugh. She just gave me a little smile, the corners of her mouth turning up a little.

'Poor boy. You're nothing but a little chicken just out of the egg.'

It was true but it angered me. Maybe because it was true. The dream and the beer wanted it to be something else. I took another drink and looked at her and said, 'Cut the shit. Lift your skirt. Show me some leg. Show me some flank.'

'You're just a boy.'

Then I said it. I don't know where the words came from, but I said it, 'I could tear you in half, baby, if you gave me the chance.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah.'

'All right. Let's see.'

Then she did it. Just like that. She uncrossed her legs and pulled her skirt back.

She didn't have on panties.

I saw her huge white upper flanks, rivers of flesh. There was a large protruding wart on the inside of her left thigh. And there was a jungle of tangled hair between her legs, but it was not bright yellow like the hair on her head, it was brown and shot with grey, old like some sick bush dying, lifeless and sad.

I stood up.

'I've got to go, Mrs Hatcher.'

'Christ, I thought you wanted to *party!*'

'Not with your son in the other room, Mrs Hatcher.'

'Don't worry about him, Hank. He's passed out.'

'No, Mrs Hatcher, I've *really* got to go.'

'All right, get out of here you god-damned little piss-ant!'

I closed the door behind me and walked down the hall of the apartment building and out into the street.

To think, somebody had suicided for that.

The night suddenly looked good. I walked along toward my parents' house.

44

I could see the road ahead of me. I was poor and I was going to stay poor. But I didn't particularly want money. I didn't know what I wanted. Yes, I did. I wanted someplace to hide out, someplace where one didn't have to do anything. The thought of being something didn't only appall me, it sickened me. The thought of being a lawyer or a councilman or an engineer, anything like that, seemed impossible to me. To get married, to have children, to get trapped in the family structure. To go someplace to work every day and to return. It was impossible. To do things, simple things, to be part of family picnics, Christmas, the 4th of July, Labor Day, Mother's Day … was a man born just to endure those things and then die? I would rather be a dishwasher, return alone to a tiny room and drink myself to sleep.

My father had a master plan. He told me, 'My son, each man during his lifetime should buy a house. Finally he dies and leaves that house to *his* son. Then his son gets his own house and dies, leaves both houses to his son. That's two houses. That son gets his own house, that's three houses …'

The family structure. Victory over adversity through the family. He believed in it. Take the family, mix with God and Country, add the ten-hour day and you had what was needed.

I looked at my father, at his hands, his face, his eyebrows, and I knew that this man had nothing to do with me. He was a stranger. My mother was non-existent. I was cursed. Looking at my father I saw nothing but indecent dullness. Worse, he was even more afraid to fail than most others. Centuries of peasant blood and peasant training. The Chinaski bloodline had been thinned by a series of peasant-servants who had surrendered their real lives for fractional and illusionary gains. Not a man in the line who said, 'I don't want a house, I want a *thousand* houses, *now!*'

He had sent me to that rich high school hoping that the ruler's attitude would rub off on me as I watched the rich boys screech up in their cream-colored coupes and pick up the girls in bright dresses. Instead I learned that the poor usually stay poor. That the young rich smell the stink of the poor and learn to find it a bit amusing. They had to laugh, otherwise it would be too terrifying. They'd learned that, through the centuries. I would never forgive the girls for getting into those cream-colored coupes with the laughing boys. They couldn't help it, of course, yet you always think, maybe … But no, there weren't any maybes. Wealth meant victory and victory was the only reality.

What woman chooses to live with a dishwasher?

Throughout high school I tried not to think too much about how things might eventually turn out for me. It seemed better to delay thinking …

Finally it was the day of the Senior Prom. It was held in the girls' gym with live music, a real band. I don't know why but I walked over that night, the two-and-one-half miles from my parents' place. I stood outside in the dark and I looked in there, through the wire-covered window, and I was astonished. All the girls looked very grown-up, stately, lovely, they were in long dresses, and they all looked beautiful. I almost didn't recognize them. And the boys in their tuxes, they looked great, they danced so straight, each of them holding a girl in his arms, their faces pressed against the girl's hair. They all danced beautifully and the music was loud and clear and good, powerful.

Then I caught a glimpse of my reflection staring in at them – boils and scars on my face, my ragged shirt. I was like some jungle animal drawn to the light and looking in. Why had I come? I felt sick. But I kept watching. The dance ended. There was a pause. Couples spoke easily to each other. It was natural and civilized. Where had they learned to converse and to dance? I couldn't converse or dance. Everybody knew something I didn't know. The girls looked so good, the boys so handsome. I would be too terrified to even look at one of those girls, let alone be close to one. To look into her eyes or dance with her would be beyond me.

And yet I knew that what I saw wasn't as simple and good as it appeared. There was a price to be paid for it all, a general falsity, that could be easily believed, and could be the first step down a dead-end street. The band began to play again and the boys and girls began to dance again and the lights revolved overhead throwing shades of gold, then red, then blue, then green, then gold again on the couples. As I watched them I said to myself, someday my dance will begin. When that day comes I will have something that they don't have.

But then it got to be too much for me. I hated them. I hated their beauty, their untroubled youth, and as I watched them dance through the magic colored pools of light, holding each other, feeling so good, little unscathed children, temporarily in luck, I hated them because they had something I had not yet had, and I said to myself, I said to myself again, *someday i will be as happy as any of you, you will see*.

They kept dancing, and I repeated it to them.

Then there was a sound behind me.

'Hey! What are you doing?'

It was an old man with a flashlight. He had a head like a frog's head.

'I'm watching the dance.'

He held the flashlight right up under his nose. His eyes were round and large, they gleamed like a cat's eyes in the moonlight. But his mouth was shriveled, collapsed, and his head was round. It had a peculiar senseless roundness that reminded me of a pumpkin trying to play pundit.

'Get your ass out of here!'

He ran the flashlight up and down all over me.

'Who are you?' I asked.

'I'm the night custodian. Get your ass out of here before I call the cops!'

'What for? This is the Senior Prom and I'm a senior.'

He flashed his light into my face. The band was playing 'Deep Purple.'

'Bullshit!' he said. 'You're at least 22 years old!'

‘I’m in the yearbook, Class of 1939, graduating class, Henry Chinaski.’

‘Why aren’t you in there dancing?’

‘Forget it. I’m going home.’

‘*Do that*.’

I walked off. I kept walking. His flashlight leaped on the path, the light following me. I walked off campus. It was a nice warm night, almost hot. I thought I saw some fireflies but I wasn’t sure.

45

Graduation Day. We filed in with our caps and gowns to 'Pomp and Circumstance.' I suppose that in our three years we must have learned something. Our ability to spell had probably improved and we had grown in size. I was still a virgin. 'Hey, Henry, you busted your cherry yet?' 'No way,' I'd say.

Jimmy Hatcher sat next to me. The principal was giving his address and really scraping the bottom of the old shit barrel. 'America is the great land of Opportunity and any man or woman with a desire to do so will succeed …'

'Dishwasher,' I said.

'Dog catcher,' said Jimmy.

'Burglar,' I said.

'Garbage collector,' said Jimmy.

'Madhouse attendant,' I said.

'America is brave, America was built by the brave … Ours is a just society.'

'Just so much for the few,' said Jimmy.

'… a fair society and all those who search for that dream at the end of the rainbow will find …'

'A hairy crawling turd,' I suggested.

'… and I can say, without hesitation, that this particular Class of Summer 1939, less than a decade removed from the beginning of our terrible national Depression, this class of Summer '39 is more ripe with courage, talent and love than *any* class it has been my pleasure to witness!'

The mothers, fathers, relatives applauded wildly; a few of the students joined in.

'Class of Summer 1939, I am proud of your future, I am *sure* of your future. I send you out now to your great *adventure!*'

Most of them were headed over to USC to live the non-working life for at least four more years.

'*And I send my prayers and blessings with you!*'

The honor students received their diplomas first. Out they came. Abe Mortenson was called. He got his. I applauded.

'Where's he gonna end up?' Jimmy asked.

'Cost accountant in an auto-parts manufacturing concern. Somewhere near Gardena, California.'

'A lifetime job …' said Jimmy.

'A lifetime wife,' I added.

'Abe will never be miserable …'

'Or happy.'

'An obedient man …'

'A broom.'

'A stiff …'

'A wimp.'

When the honor students had been taken care of they began on us. I felt uncomfortable sitting there. I felt like walking out.

'Henry Chinaski!' I was called.

'Public servant,' I told Jimmy.

I walked up to and across the stage, took the diploma, shook the principal's hand. It felt slimy like the inside of a dirty fish bowl. (Two years later he would be exposed as an embezzler of school funds; he was to be tried, convicted and jailed.) I passed Mortenson and the honor group as I went back to my seat. He looked over and gave me the finger, so only I could see it. That got me. It was so unexpected.

I walked back and sat down next to Jimmy.

'Mortenson gave me the *finger!*'

'No, I don't *believe* it!'

'Son-of-a-bitch! He's spoiled my day! Not that it was worth a fuck anyhow but he's really greased it over now!'

'I can't believe he had the guts to *finger* you.'

'It's not like him. You think he's getting some coaching?'

'I don't know what to think.'

'He knows that I can bust him in half without even inhaling!'

'Bust him!'

'But don't you see, he's won? It's the way he surprised me!'

'All you gotta do is kick his ass all up and down.'

'Do you think that son-of-a-bitch learned something reading all those books? I know there's nothing in them because I read every fourth page.'

'Jimmy Hatcher!' His name was called.

'Priest,' he said.

'Poultry farmer,' I said.

Jimmy went up and got his. I applauded loudly. Anybody who could live with a mother like his deserved some accolade. He came back and we sat watching all the golden boys and girls go up and get theirs.

'You can't blame them for being rich,' Jimmy said.

'No, I blame their fucking parents.'

'And their grandparents,' said Jimmy.

'Yes, I'd be happy to take their new cars and their pretty girlfriends and I wouldn't give a fuck about anything like social justice.'

'Yeah,' said Jimmy. 'I guess the only time most people think about injustice is when it happens to them.'

The golden boys and girls went on parading across the stage. I sat there wondering whether to punch Abe out or not. I could see him flopping on the sidewalk still in his cap and gown, the victim of my right cross, all the pretty girls screaming, thinking, my god, this Chinaski guy must be a *bull* on the springs!

On the other hand, Abe wasn't much. He was hardly there. It wouldn't take anything to punch him out. I decided not to do it. I had already broken his arm and his parents hadn't sued mine, finally. If I busted his head they would surely go ahead and sue. They would take my old man's last copper. Not that I would mind. It was my mother: she would suffer in a fool's way: senselessly and without reason.

Then, the ceremony was over. The students left their seats and filed out. Students met with parents, relatives on the front lawn. There was much hugging, embracing. I saw my parents waiting. I walked up to them, stood about four feet away.

'Let's get out of here,' I said.

My mother was looking at me.

'Henry, I'm so proud of you!'

Then my mother's head turned. 'Oh, there goes Abe and his parents! They're such *nice* people! *Oh, Mrs Mortenson!*'

They stopped. My mother ran over and threw her arms about Mrs Mortenson. It was Mrs Mortenson who had decided not to sue after many, many hours of conversation upon the telephone with my mother. It had been decided that I was a confused individual and that my mother had suffered enough that way.

My father shook hands with Mr Mortenson and I walked over to Abe.

'OK, cocksucker, what's the idea of giving me the finger?'

'What?'

'The *finger!*'

'I don't know what you're talking about!'

'*The finger!*'

'Henry, I really don't know what you're talking about!'

'All right, Abraham, it's time to go!' said his mother.

The Mortenson family walked off together. I stood there watching them. Then we started walking to our old car. We walked west to the corner and turned south.

'Now that Mortenson boy really knows how to *apply* himself!' said my father. 'How are *you* ever going to make it? I've never even seen you look *at* a schoolbook, let alone *inside* of one!'

'Some books are dull,' I said.

'Oh, they're *dull*, are they? So you don't *want* to study? What *can* you do? What *good* are you? What can you *do?* It has cost me thousands of dollars to raise you, feed you, clothe you! Suppose I left you here on the street? Then what would you do?'

'Catch butterflies.'

My mother began to cry. My father pulled her away and down the block to where their ten-year-old car was parked. As I stood there, the other families roared past in their new cars, going somewhere.

Then Jimmy Hatcher and his mother walked by. She stopped. 'Hey, wait a minute,' she told Jimmy, 'I want to congratulate

Henry.'

Jimmy waited and Clare walked over. She put her face close to mine. She spoke softly so Jimmy wouldn't hear. 'Listen, Honey, any time you *really* want to graduate, I can arrange to give you your diploma.'

'Thanks, Clare, I might be seeing you.'

'I'll rip your balls off, Henry!'

'I don't doubt it, Clare.'

She went back to Jimmy and they walked away down the street.

A very old car rolled up, stopped, the engine died. I could see my mother weeping, big tears were running down her cheeks.

'Henry, get in! *Please* get in! Your father is right but I love you!'

'Forget it. I've got a place to go.'

'No, Henry, get in!' she wailed. 'Get in or I'll *die!*'

I walked over, opened the rear door, climbed into the rear seat. The engine started and we were off again. There I sat, Henry Chinaski, Class of Summer '39, driving into the bright future. No, being driven. At the first red light the car stalled. As the signal turned green my father was still trying to start the engine. Somebody behind us honked. My father got the car started and we were in motion again. My mother had stopped crying. We drove along like that, each of us silent.

46

Times were still hard. Nobody was any more surprised than I when Mears-Starbuck phoned and asked me to report to work the next Monday. I had gone all around town putting in dozens of applications. There was nothing else to do. I didn't want a job but I didn't want to live with my parents either. Mears-Starbuck must have had thousands of applications on hand. I couldn't believe they had chosen me. It was a department store with branches in many cities.

The next Monday, there I was walking to work with my lunch in a brown paper bag. The department store was only a few blocks away from my former high school.

I still didn't understand why I had been selected. After filling out the application, the interview had lasted only a few minutes. I must have given all the right answers.

First paycheck I get, I thought, I'm going to get myself a room near the downtown LA Public Library.

As I walked along I didn't feel so alone and I wasn't. I noticed a starving mongrel dog following me. The poor creature was terribly thin; I could see his ribs poking through his skin. Most of his fur had fallen off. What remained clung in dry, twisted patches. The dog was beaten, cowed, deserted, frightened, a victim of Homo sapiens.

I stopped and knelt, put out my hand. He backed off.

'Come here, fellow, I'm your friend … Come on, come on …'

He came closer. He had such sad eyes.

'What have they done to you, boy?'

He came still closer, creeping along the sidewalk, trembling, wagging his tail quite rapidly. Then he leaped at me. He was large, what was left of him. His forelegs pushed me backwards and I was flat on the sidewalk and he was licking my face, mouth, ears, forehead, everywhere. I pushed him off, got up and wiped my face.

'Easy now! You need something to *eat!* FOOD!'

I reached into my bag and took out a sandwich. I unwrapped it and broke off a portion.

'Some for you and some for me, old boy!'

I put his part of the sandwich on the sidewalk. He came up, sniffed at it, then walked off, slinking, staring back at me over his shoulder as he walked down the street away from me.

'Hey, wait, buddy! That was *peanut butter!* Come here, have some *Bologna!* Hey, boy, come here! Come back!'

The dog approached again, cautiously. I found the Bologna sandwich, ripped off a chunk, wiped the cheap watery mustard off, then placed it on the sidewalk.

The dog walked up to the bit of sandwich, put his nose to it, sniffed, then turned and walked off. This time he didn't look back. He accelerated down the street.

No wonder I had been depressed all my life. I wasn't getting proper nourishment.

I walked on toward the department store. It was the same street I had walked along to go to high school.

I arrived. I found the employees' entrance, pushed the door open and walked in. I went from bright sunlight into semidarkness. As my eyes adjusted I could make out a man standing several feet away in front of me. Half of his left ear had been sliced off at some point in the past. He was a tall, very thin man with needlepoint grey pupils centered in otherwise colorless eyes. A very tall thin man, yet right above his belt, sticking out over his belt – suddenly – was a sad and hideous and strange pot belly. All his fat had settled there while the remainder of him had wasted away.

'I'm Superintendent Ferris,' he said. 'I presume that you're Mr Chinaski?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You're five minutes late.'

'I was delayed by … Well, I stopped to try to feed a starving dog,' I grinned.

'That's one of the lousiest excuses I've ever heard and I've been here thirty-five years. Couldn't you come up with a better one than that?'

'I'm just starting, Mr Ferris.'

'And you're almost finished. Now,' he pointed, 'the timeclock is over there and the card rack is over there. Find your card and punch in.'

I found my card. Henry Chinaski, employee #68754. Then I walked up to the timeclock but I didn't know what to do.

Ferris walked over and stood behind me, staring at the timeclock.

'You're now six minutes late. When you are ten minutes late we dock you an hour.'

'I guess it's better to be an hour late.'

'Don't be funny. If I want a comedian I listen to Jack Benny. If you're an hour late you're docked your whole god-damned job.'

'I'm sorry, but I don't know how to use a timeclock. I mean, how do I punch in?'

Ferris grabbed the card out of my hand. He pointed at it.

'See this slot?'

'Yeah.'

'What?'

'I mean, "yes."'

'OK, that slot is for the first day of the week. Today.'

'Ah.'

'You slip the timecard into here like this …'

He slipped it in, then pulled it out.

'Then when your timecard is in there you hit this lever.'

Ferris hit the lever but the timecard wasn't in there.

'I understand. Let's begin.'

'No, wait.'

He held the timecard in front of me.

'Now, when you punch out for lunch, you hit this slot.'

'Yes, I understand.'

'Then when you punch back in, you hit the next slot. Lunch is thirty minutes.'

'Thirty minutes, I've got it.'

‘Now, when you punch out, you hit the last slot. That’s four punches a day. Then you go home, or to your room or wherever, sleep, come back and hit it four more times each working day until you get fired, quit, die or retire.’

‘I’ve got it.’

‘And I want you to know that you’ve delayed my indoctrination speech to our new employees, of which you, at the moment, are one. I am in charge here. My word is law and your wishes mean nothing. If I dislike anything about you – the way you tie your shoes, comb your hair or fart, you’re back on the streets, get it?’

‘Yes, sir!’

A young girl came flouncing in, running on her high heels, long brown hair flowing behind her. She was dressed in a tight red dress. Her lips were large and expressive with excessive lipstick. She theatrically pulled her card out of the rack, punched in, and breathing with minor excitement, she put her card back in the rack.

She glanced over at Ferris.

‘Hi, Eddie!’

‘Hi, Diana!’

Diana was obviously a salesgirl. Ferris walked over to her. They stood talking. I couldn’t hear the conversation but I could hear them laughing. Then they broke off. Diana walked over and waited for the elevator to take her to her work. Ferris walked back toward me holding my timecard.

‘I’ll punch in now, Mr Ferris,’ I told him.

‘I’ll do it for you. I want to start you out right.’

Ferris inserted my timecard into the clock and stood there. He waited. I heard the clock tick, then he hit it. He put my card in the rack.

‘How late was I, Mr Ferris?’

‘Ten minutes. Now follow me.’

I followed along behind him.

I saw the group waiting.

Four men and three women. They were all old. They seemed to have salivary problems. Little clumps of spittle had formed at the corners of their mouths; the spittle had dried and turned white and then been coated by new wet spittle. Some of them were too thin, others too fat. Some were near-sighted; others trembled. One old fellow in a brightly-colored shirt had a hump on his back. They all smiled and coughed, puffing at cigarettes.

Then I got it. The message.

Mears-Starbuck was looking for *stayers*. The company didn't care for employee turnover (although these new recruits obviously weren't going anywhere but to the grave – until then they'd remain grateful and loyal employees). And I had been chosen to work alongside of them. The lady in the employment office had evaluated me as belonging with this pathetic group of losers.

What would the guys in high school think if they saw me? Me, one of the toughest guys in the graduating class.

I walked over and stood with my group. Ferris sat on a table facing us. A shaft of light fell upon him from an overhead transom. He inhaled his cigarette and smiled at us.

'Welcome to Mears-Starbuck …'

Then he seemed to fall into a reverie. Perhaps he was thinking about when he had first joined the department store thirty-five years ago. He blew a few smoke rings and watched them rise into the air. His half-sliced ear looked impressive in the light from above.

The guy next to me, a little pretzel of a man, knifed his sharp little elbow into my side. He was one of those individuals whose glasses always seem ready to fall off. He was uglier than I was.

'Hi!' he whispered. 'I'm Mewks. Odell Mewks.'

'Hello, Mewks.'

'Listen, kid, after work let's you and me make the bars. Maybe we can pick up some girls.'

'I can't, Mewks.'

'Afraid of girls?'

‘It’s my brother, he’s sick. I’ve got to watch over him.’

‘Sick?’

‘Worse. Cancer. He has to piss through a tube into a bottle strapped to his leg.’

Then Ferris began again. ‘Your starting salary is forty-four-and-a-half cents an hour. We are non-union here. Management believes that what is fair for the company is fair for you. We are like a family, dedicated to serve and to profit. You will each receive a ten-percent discount on all merchandise you purchase from Mears-Starbuck …’

‘OH, BOY!’ Mewks said in a loud voice.

‘Yes, Mr Mewks, it’s a good deal. You take care of us, we’ll take care of you.’

I could stay with Mears-Starbuck for forty-seven years, I thought. I could live with a crazy girlfriend, get my left ear sliced off and maybe inherit Ferris’ job when he retired.

Ferris talked about which holidays we could look forward to and then the speech was over. We were issued our smocks and our lockers and then we were directed to the underground storage facilities.

Ferris worked down there too. He manned the phones. Whenever he answered the phone he would hold it to his sliced left ear with his left hand and clamp his right hand under his left armpit. ‘Yes? Yes? Yes. Coming right up!’

‘Chinaski!’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Lingerie department …’

Then he would pick up the order pad, list the items needed and how many of each. He never did this while on the phone, always afterwards.

‘Locate these items, deliver them to the lingerie department, obtain a signature and return.’

His speech never varied.

My first delivery *was* to lingerie. I located the items, placed them in my little green cart with its four rubber wheels and pushed it toward the elevator. The elevator was at an upper floor and I pressed the button and waited. After some time I could see the bottom of the elevator as it came down. It was very slow. Then it was at basement level. The doors opened and an albino with one eye stood at the controls. Jesus.

He looked at me.

'New guy, huh?' he asked.

'Yeah.'

'What do you think of Ferris?'

'I think he's a great guy.'

They probably lived together in the same room and took turns manning the hotplate.

'I can't take you up.'

'Why not?'

'I gotta take a shit.'

He left the elevator and walked off.

There I stood in my smock. This was the way things usually worked. You were a governor or a garbageman, you were a tight-rope walker or a bank robber, you were a dentist or a fruit picker, you were this or you were that. You wanted to do a good job. You manned your station and then you stood and waited for some asshole. I stood there in my smock next to my green cart while the elevator man took a shit.

It came to me then, clearly, why the rich, golden boys and girls were always laughing. They knew.

The albino returned.

'It was great. I feel thirty pounds lighter.'

'Good. Can we go now?'

He closed the doors and we rose to the sales floor. He opened the doors.

'Good luck,' said the albino.

I pushed my green cart down through the aisles looking for the lingerie department, a Miss Meadows.

Miss Meadows was waiting. She was slender and classy-looking. She looked like a model. Her arms were folded. As I approached her I noticed her eyes. They were an emerald green, there was depth, a knowledge there. I should know somebody like that. Such eyes, such class. I stopped my cart in front of her counter.

'Hello, Miss Meadows,' I smiled.

'Where the hell have you been?' she asked.

'It just took this long.'

'Do you realize I have customers waiting? Do you realize that I'm attempting to run an efficient department here?'

The salesclerks got ten cents an hour more than we did, plus commissions. I was to discover that they never spoke to us in a friendly way. Male or female, the clerks were the same. They took any familiarity as an affront.

'I've got a good mind to phone Mr Ferris.'

'I'll do better next time, Miss Meadows.'

I placed the goods on her counter and then handed her the form to sign. She scratched her signature furiously on the paper, then instead of handing it back to me she threw it into my green cart.

'Christ, I don't know where they *find* people like you!'

I pushed my cart over to the elevator, hit the button and waited. The doors opened and I rolled on in.

'How'd it go?' the albino asked me.

'I feel thirty pounds heavier,' I told him.

He grinned, the doors closed and we descended.

Over dinner that night my mother said, 'Henry, I'm so proud of you that you have a job!'

I didn't answer.

My father said, 'Well, aren't you glad to have a job?'

'Yeah.'

'Yeah? Is *that* all you can say? Do you realize how many men are unemployed in this nation now?'

'Plenty, I guess.'

'Then you should be grateful.'

'Look, can't we just eat our food?'

'You should be grateful for your food, too. Do you know how much this meal cost?'

I shoved my plate away. 'Shit! I can't eat this stuff!'

I got up and walked to my bedroom.

'I've got a good mind to come back there and teach you what is what!'

I stopped. 'I'll be waiting, old man.'

Then I walked away. I went in and waited. But I knew he wasn't coming. I set the alarm to get ready for Mears-Starbuck. It was only 7.30 p.m. but I undressed and went to bed. I switched off the light and was in the dark. There was nothing else to do, nowhere to go. My parents would soon be in bed with the lights out.

My father liked the slogan, 'Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.'

But it hadn't done any of that for him. I decided that I might try to reverse the process.

I couldn't sleep.

Maybe if I masturbated to Miss Meadows?

Too cheap.

I wallowed there in the dark, waiting for something.

47

The first three or four days at Mears-Starbuck were identical. In fact, similarity was a very dependable thing at Mears-Starbuck. The caste system was an accepted fact. There wasn’t a single salesclerk who spoke to a stockclerk outside of a perfunctory word or two. And it affected me. I thought about it as I pushed my cart about. Was it possible that the salesclerks were more intelligent than the stockclerks? They certainly dressed better. It bothered me that they assumed that their station meant so much. Perhaps if I had been a salesclerk I would have felt the same way. I didn’t much care for the other stockclerks. Or the salesclerks.

Now, I thought, pushing my cart along, I have this job. Is this to be it? No wonder men robbed banks. There were too many demeaning jobs. Why the hell wasn’t I a superior court judge or a concert pianist? Because it took training and training cost money. But I didn’t want to be anything anyhow. And I was certainly succeeding.

I pushed my cart to the elevator and hit the button.

Women wanted men who made money, women wanted men of mark. How many classy women were living with skid row bums? Well, I didn’t want a woman anyhow. Not to live with. How could men live with women? What did it mean? What I wanted was a cave in Colorado with three-years’ worth of foodstuffs and drink. I’d wipe my ass with sand. Anything, anything to stop drowning in this dull, trivial and cowardly existence.

The elevator came up. The albino was still at the controls.

‘Hey, I hear you and Mewks made the bars last night!’

‘He bought me a few beers. I’m broke.’

‘You guys get laid?’

‘I didn’t.’

‘Why don’t you guys take me along next time? I’ll show you how to get some snatch.’

‘What do you know?’

'I've been around. Just last week I had a Chinese girl. And you know, it's just like they say.'

'What's that?'

We hit the basement and the doors opened.

'Their snatch doesn't run up and down, it runs from side to side.'

Ferris was waiting for me.

'Where the hell you been?'

'Home gardening.'

'What did you do, fertilize the fuchsias?'

'Yeah, I drop one turd in each pot.'

'Listen, Chinaski …'

'Yes?'

'The punchlines around here belong to me. Got it?'

'Got it.'

'Well, get this. I've got an order here for Men's Wear.'

He handed me the order slip.

'Locate these items, deliver them, obtain a signature and return.'

Men's Wear was run by Mr Justin Phillips, Jr. He was well-bred, he was polite, around twenty-two. He stood very straight, had dark hair, dark eyes, brooding lips. There was an unfortunate absence of cheekbones but it was hardly noticeable. He was pale and wore dark clothing with beautifully starched shirts. The salesgirls loved him. He was sensitive, intelligent, clever. He was also just a bit nasty as if some forebear had passed down that right to him. He had only broken with tradition once to speak to me. 'It's a shame, isn't it, those rather ugly scars on your face?'

As I rolled my cart up to Men's Wear, Justin Phillips was standing very straight, head tilted a bit, staring, as he did most of the time, looking off and up as if he was seeing things we were not. He saw things out there. Maybe I just didn't recognize breeding when I saw it. He certainly appeared to be above his surroundings. It was a good trick if you could do it and get paid at the same time. Maybe that's what management and the salesgirls liked. Here was a man truly too good for what he was doing, but he was doing it anyhow.

I rolled up. 'Here's your order, Mr Phillips.'

He appeared not to notice me, which hurt in a sense, and was a good thing in another. I stacked the goods on the counter as he stared off into space, just above the elevator door.

Then I heard golden laughter and I looked. It was a gang of guys who had graduated with me from Chelsey High. They were trying on sweaters, hiking shorts, various items. I knew them by sight only, as we had never spoken during our four years of high school. The leader was Jimmy Newhall. He had been the halfback on our football team, undefeated for three years. His hair was a beautiful yellow, the sun always seemed to be highlighting parts of it, the sun or the lights in the schoolroom. He had a thick, powerful neck and above it sat the face of a perfect boy sculpted by some master sculptor. Everything was exactly as it should be: nose, forehead, chin, the works. And the body likewise, perfectly formed. The others with Newhall were not exactly as perfect as he was, but they were close. They stood around and tried on sweaters and laughed, waiting to go to USC or Stanford.

Justin Phillips signed my receipt. I was on my way back to the elevator when I heard a voice: 'HEY, SKI! SKI, YOU LOOK GREAT IN YOUR LITTLE OUTFIT!'

I stopped, turned, gave them a casual wave of the left hand.

'Look at him! Toughest guy in town since Tommy Dorsey!'

'Makes Gable look like a toilet plunger.'

I left my wagon and walked back. I didn't know what I was going to do. I stood there and looked at them. I didn't like them, never had. They might look glorious to others but not to me. There was something about their bodies that was like a woman's body. They were soft, they had never faced any fire. They were beautiful nothings. They made me sick. I hated them. They were part of the nightmare that always haunted me in one form or another.

Jimmy Newhall smiled at me. ‘Hey, stockboy, how come you never tried out for the team?’

‘It wasn’t what I wanted.’

‘No guts, eh?’

‘You know where the parking lot on the roof is?’

‘Sure.’

‘See you there …’

They strolled out toward the parking lot as I took my smock off and threw it into the cart. Justin Phillips, Jr smiled at me, ‘My dear boy, you are going to get your ass whipped.’

Jimmy Newhall was waiting, surrounded by his buddies.

‘Hey, look, the stockboy!’

‘You think he’s wearing ladies’ underwear?’

Newhall was standing in the sun. He had his shirt off and his undershirt too. He had his gut sucked in and his chest pushed out. He looked good. What the hell had I gotten into? I felt my underlip trembling. Up there on the roof, I felt fear. I looked at Newhall, the golden sun highlighting his golden hair. I had watched him many times on the football field. I had seen him break off many 50 and 60 yard runs while I rooted for the other team.

Now we stood looking at each other. I left my shirt on. We kept standing. I kept standing.

Newhall finally said, ‘OK, I’m going to take you now.’ He started to move forward. Just then a little old lady dressed in black came by with many packages. She had on a tiny green felt hat.

‘Hello, boys!’ she said.

‘Hello, ma’am.’

‘Lovely day …’

The little old lady opened her car door and loaded in the packages. Then she turned to Jimmy Newhall.

‘Oh, what a *fine* body you have, my boy! I’ll bet you could be Tarzan of the Apes!’

‘No, ma’am,’ I said. ‘Pardon me, but he’s the *ape* and those with him are his tribe.’

‘Oh,’ she said. She got into her car, started it and we waited as she backed out and drove off.

‘OK, Chinaski,’ said Newhall, ‘all through school you were famous for your sneer and your big god-damned mouth. And *now* I’m going to put the cure on you!’

Newhall bounded forward. He was ready. I wasn’t quite ready. All I saw was a backdrop of blue sky and a flash of body and fists. He was quicker than an ape, and bigger. I couldn’t seem to throw a punch, I only felt his fists and they were rock hard. Squinting through punched eyes I could see his fists, swinging, landing, my god, he had power, it seemed endless and there was no place to go. I began to think, maybe you are a sissy, maybe you should be, maybe you should quit.

But as he continued to punch, my fear vanished. I felt only astonishment at his strength and energy. Where did he get it? A swine like him? He was loaded. I couldn’t see anymore – my eyes were blinded by flashes of yellow and green light, purple light – then a terrific shot of RED … I felt myself going down.

Is this the way it happens?

I fell to one knee. I heard an airplane passing overhead. I wished I was on it. I felt something run over my mouth and chin … it was warm blood running from my nose.

‘Let him go, Jimmy, he’s finished …’

I looked at Newhall. ‘Your mother sucks cock,’ I told him.

‘I’LL KILL YOU!’

Newhall rushed me before I could quite get up. He had me by the throat and we rolled over and over, under a Dodge. I heard his head hit something. I didn’t know what it hit but I heard the sound. It happened quite quickly and the others were not as aware of it as I was.

I got up and then Newhall got up.

‘I’m going to kill you,’ he said.

Newhall windmilled in. This time it wasn’t nearly so bad. He punched with the same fury, but something was missing. He was weaker. When he hit me I didn’t see flashes of color, I could see the sky, the parked cars, the faces of his friends, and him. I had always been a slow starter. Newhall was still trying but he was definitely weaker. And I had my small hands, I was blessed with small hands, lousy weapons.

What a weary time those years were – to have the desire and the need to live but not the ability.

I dug a hard right to his belly and I heard him gasp so I grabbed him behind the neck with my left and dug another right to his belly. Then I pushed him off and cracked him with a one-two, right into that sculpted face. I saw his eyes and it was great. I was bringing something to him that he had never felt before. He was terrified. Terrified because he didn't know how to handle defeat. I decided to finish him slowly.

Then someone slugged me on the back of the head. It was a good hard shot. I turned and looked.

It was his red-headed friend, Cal Evans.

I yelled, pointing at him. 'Stay the fuck away from me! I'll take all of you one at a time! As soon as I'm done with this guy, you're next!'

It didn't take much to finish Jimmy. I even tried some fancy footwork. I jabbed a bit, played around and then I moved in and started punching. He took it pretty good and for a while I thought I couldn't finish it but all of a sudden he gave me this strange look which said, hey, look, maybe we ought to be buddies and go have a couple of beers together. Then he dropped.

His friends moved in and picked him up, they held him up, talked to him, 'Hey, Jim, you OK?'

'What'd the son-of-a-bitch do to you, Jim? We'll clean his drawers, Jim. Just give us the word.'

'Take me home,' Jim said.

I watched them go down the stairway, all of them trying to hold him up, one guy carrying his shirt and undershirt …

I went downstairs to get my cart. Justin Phillips was waiting.

'I didn't think you'd be back,' he smiled disdainfully.

'Don't fraternize with the unskilled help,' I told him.

I pushed off. My face, my clothes – I was pretty badly messed up. I walked to the elevator and hit the button. The albino came in due time. The doors opened.

'The word's out,' he said. 'I hear you're the new heavyweight champion of the world.'

News travels fast in places where nothing much ever happens.

Ferris of the sliced ear was waiting.

'You just don't go around beating the shit out of our customers.'

'It was only one.'

'We have no way of knowing when you might start in on the others.'

'This guy baited me.'

'We don't give a damn about that. That's what happens. All we know is that you were out of line.'

'How about my check?'

'It'll be mailed.'

'OK, see you …'

'Wait, I'll need your locker key.'

I got out my key chain which only had one other key on it, pulled off the locker key and handed it to Ferris.

Then I walked to the employees' door, pulled it open. It was a heavy steel door which worked awkwardly. As it opened, letting in the daylight, I turned and gave Ferris a small wave. He didn't respond. He just looked straight at me. Then the door closed on him. I liked him, somehow.

48

‘So you couldn’t hold a job for a week?’

We were eating meatballs and spaghetti. My problems were always discussed at dinner time. Dinner time was almost always an unhappy time.

I didn’t answer my father’s question.

‘What happened? Why did they can your ass?’

I didn’t answer.

‘Henry, answer your father when he speaks to you!’ my mother said.

‘He couldn’t hack it, that’s all!’

‘Look at his face,’ said my mother, ‘it’s all bruised and cut. Did your boss beat you up, Henry?’

‘No, Mother …’

‘Why don’t you eat, Henry? You never seem to be hungry.’

‘He can’t eat,’ said my father, ‘he can’t work, he can’t do anything, he’s not worth a fuck!’

‘You shouldn’t talk that way at the dinner table, Daddy,’ my mother told him.

‘Well, it’s true!’ My father had an immense ball of spaghetti rolled on his fork. He jammed it into his mouth and started chewing and while chewing he speared a large meatball and plunged it into his mouth, then worked in a piece of French bread.

I remembered what Ivan had said in *The Brothers Karamazov*, ‘Who doesn’t want to kill the father?’

As my father chewed at the mass of food, one long string of spaghetti dangled from a corner of his mouth. He finally noticed it and sucked it in noisily. Then he reached, put two large teaspoons of white sugar into his coffee, lifted the cup and took a giant mouthful, which he immediately spit out across his plate and onto the tablecloth.

‘That shit’s too *hot!*’

‘You should be more careful, Daddy,’ said my mother.

I combed the job market, as they used to say, but it was a dreary and useless routine. You had to know somebody to get a job even as a lowly bus boy. Thus everybody was a dish-washer, the whole town was full of unemployed dish-washers. I sat with them in Pershing Square in the afternoons. The evangelists were there too. Some had drums, some had guitars, and the bushes and restrooms crawled with homosexuals.

'Some of them have money,' a young bum told me. 'This guy took me to his apartment for two weeks. I had all I could eat and drink and he bought me some clothes but he sucked me dry, I couldn't stand up after a while. One night when he was asleep I crawled out of there. It was horrible. He kissed me once and I knocked him across the room. "You ever do that again," I told him, "and I'll kill you!"'

Clifton's Cafeteria was nice. If you didn't have much money, they let you pay what you could. And if you didn't have any money, you didn't have to pay. Some of the bums went in there and ate well. It was owned by some very nice rich old man, a very unusual person. I could never make myself go in there and load up. I'd go in for a coffee and an apple pie and give them a nickel. Sometimes I'd get a couple of weenies. It was quiet and cool in there and clean. There was a large waterfall and you could sit next to it and imagine that everything was quite all right. Philippe's was nice too. You could get a cup of coffee for three cents with all the refills you wanted. You could sit in there all day drinking coffee and they never asked you to leave no matter how bad you looked. They just asked the bums not to bring in their wine and drink it there. Places like that gave you hope when there wasn't much hope.

The men in Pershing Square argued all day about whether there was a God or not. Most of them didn't argue very well but now and then you got a Religionist and an Atheist who were well-versed and it was a good show.

When I had a few coins I'd go to the underground bar beneath the big movie house. I was 18 but they served me. I looked like I could be almost any age. Sometimes I looked 25, sometimes I felt like 30. The bar was run by Chinese who never spoke to anyone. All I needed was the first beer and then the homosexuals would start buying. I'd switch to whiskey sours. I'd bleed them for whiskey sours and when they started closing in on me, I'd get nasty, push off and leave. After a while they caught on and the place wasn't any good anymore.

The library was the most depressing place I went. I had run out of books to read. After a while I would just grab a thick book and look for a young girl somewhere. There were always one or two about. I'd sit three or four chairs away, pretending to read the book, trying to look intelligent, hoping some girl would pick me up. I knew that I was ugly but I thought if I looked intelligent enough I might have some chance. It never worked. The girls just made notes on their pads and then they got up and left as I watched their bodies moving rhythmically and magically under their clean dresses. What would Maxim Gorky have done under such circumstances?

At home it was always the same. The question was never asked until after the first few bites of dinner were partaken. Then my father would ask, 'Did you find a job today?'

'No.'

'Did you try anywhere?'

'Many places. I've gone back to some of the same places for the second or third time.'

'I don't believe it.'

But it was true. It was also true that some companies put ads in the papers every day when there were no jobs available. It gave the employment department in those companies something to do. It also wasted the time and screwed up the hopes of many desperate people.

'You'll find a job tomorrow, Henry,' my mother would always say …

49

I looked for a job all summer and couldn't find one. Jimmy Hatcher caught on at an aircraft plant. Hitler was acting up in Europe and creating jobs for the unemployed. I had been with Jimmy that day when we had turned in our applications. We filled them out in similar fashion, the only difference being where it said *Place of Birth*, I put down Germany and he put down Reading, Pennsylvania.

'Jimmy got a job. He came from the same school and he's your age,' said my mother. 'Why couldn't you get a job at the aircraft plant?'

'They can tell a man who doesn't have a taste for work,' said my father. 'All he wants to do is to sit in the bedroom on his dead ass and listen to his symphony music!'

'Well, the boy likes music. That's something.'

'But he doesn't DO anything with it! He doesn't make it USEFUL!'

'What should he do?'

'He should go to a radio station and tell them he likes that kind of music and get a job broadcasting.'

'Christ, it's not done like that, it's not that easy.'

'What do you know? Have you tried it?'

'I tell you, it can't be done.'

My father put a large piece of pork chop into his mouth. A greasy portion hung out from between his lips as he chewed. It was as if he had three lips. Then he sucked it in and looked at my mother. 'You see, Mama, the boy doesn't want to work.'

My mother looked at me. 'Henry, why don't you eat your food?'

It was finally decided that I would enroll at LA City College. There was no tuition fee and second-hand books could be purchased at the Co-op Book Store. My father was simply ashamed that I was unemployed and by going to school I would at least earn some respectability. Eli LaCrosse (Baldy) had already been there a term. He counseled me.

‘What’s the easiest fucking thing to take?’ I asked him.

‘Journalism. Those journalism majors don’t do anything.’

‘OK, I’ll be a journalist.’

I looked through the school booklet.

‘What’s this Orientation Day they speak of here?’

‘Oh, you just skip that, that’s bullshit.’

‘Thanks for telling me, buddy, We’ll go instead to that bar across from campus and have a couple of beers.’

‘Damn right!’

‘Yeah.’

The day after Orientation Day was the day you signed up for classes. People were running about frantically with papers and booklets. I had come over on the streetcar. I took the ‘W’ to Vermont and then took the ‘V’ north to Monroe. I didn’t know where everybody was going, or what I should do. I felt sick.

‘Pardon me …’ I asked a girl.

She turned her head and kept walking briskly. A guy came running by and I grabbed him by the back of his belt and stopped him.

‘Hey, what the hell are you doing?’ he asked.

‘Shut up. I want to know what’s going on! I want to know what to do!’

‘They explained everything to you in Orientation.’

‘Oh …’

I let him go and he ran off. I didn’t know what to do. I had imagined that you just went somewhere and told them you wanted to take Journalism, Beginning Journalism, and they’d give you a card with a schedule of your classes. It was nothing like that. These people knew what to do and they wouldn’t talk. I felt as if I was in grammar school again, being mutilated by the crowd who knew more than I did. I sat down on a bench and watched them running back and forth. Maybe I’d fake it. I’d just tell my parents I was going to LA City College and I’d come every day and lay on the lawn. Then I saw this guy running along. It was Baldy. I got him from behind by the collar.

‘Hey, hey, Hank! What’s happening?’

'I ought to cream you right now, you little asshole!'

'What's wrong? What's wrong?'

'How do I get a fucking class? What do I do?'

'I thought you knew!'

'How? *How* would I know? Was I born with this knowledge inside of me, fully indexed, ready to consult when needed?'

I walked him over to a bench, still holding him by his shirt collar. 'Now, lay it out, nice and clear, everything that needs to be done and how to do it. Do a good job and I might not cream you at this moment!'

So Baldy explained it all. I had my own Orientation Day right there. I still held him by the collar. 'I'm going to let you go now. But some day I'm going to even this thing out. You're going to pay for fucking me over. You won't know when, but it's going to happen.'

I let him go. He went running off with the rest of them. There was no need for me to worry or hurry. I was going to get the worst classes, the worst teachers and the worst hours. I strolled about leisurely signing up for classes. I appeared to be the only unconcerned student on campus. I began to feel superior.

Until my first 7 a.m. English class. It was 7.30 a.m. and I was hungover as I stood there outside the door, listening. My parents had paid for my books and I had sold them for drinking money. I had slid out of the bedroom window the night before and had closed the neighborhood bar. I had a throbbing beer hangover. I still felt drunk. I opened the door and walked in. I stood there. Mr Hamilton, the English instructor, was standing before the class, singing. A record player was on, loud, and the class was singing along with Mr Hamilton. It was Gilbert and Sullivan.

Now I am the ruler of the Queen's Navy …

I copied all the letters in a big round hand …

Now I am the ruler of the Queen's Navy …

Stick close to your desks and never go to sea …

And you all may be rulers of the Queen's Navy …

I walked to the rear of the class and found an empty seat. Hamilton walked over and shut off the record player. He was dressed in a black-and-white pepper suit with a shirt-front of bright orange. He looked like Nelson Eddy. Then he faced the class, glanced at his wrist watch and addressed me: 'You must be Mr Chinaski?'

I nodded.

'You are thirty minutes late.'

'Yes.'

'Would you be thirty minutes late to a wedding or a funeral?'

'No.'

'Why not, pray tell?'

'Well, if the funeral was mine I'd have to be on time. If the wedding was mine it would be my funeral.' I was always quick with the mouth. I would never learn.

'My dear sir,' said Mr Hamilton, 'we have been listening to Gilbert and Sullivan in order to learn proper enunciation. Please stand up.'

I stood up.

'Now, please sing, *Stick close to your desks and never go to sea and you'll always be the ruler of the Queen's Navy*.'

I stood there.

'Well, go ahead, please!'

I went through it and sat down.

'Mr Chinaski, I could barely hear you. Couldn't you sing with just a bit more verve?'

I stood up again. I sucked in a giant sea of air and let go. 'IF YA WANNA BE DA RULLER OF DEY QUEEN'S NABY STICK CLOSE TA YUR DESKS AN NEVA GO TA SEA!'

I had gotten it backwards.

'Mr Chinaski,' said Mr Hamilton, 'please sit down.'

I sat down. It was Baldy's fault.

50

Everybody had gym period at the same time. Baldy’s locker was about four or five down from mine in the same row. I went to my locker early. Baldy and I had a similar problem. We hated wool pants because the wool itched our legs but our parents just loved for us to wear wool. I had solved the problem, for Baldy and myself, by letting him in on a secret. All you had to do was to wear your pajamas underneath the wool pants.

I opened my locker and undressed. I got my pants and pajamas off and then I took the pajamas and hid them on top of the locker. I got into my gym suit. The other guys were starting to walk in.

Baldy and I had some great pajama stories but Baldy’s was the best. He had been out with his girlfriend one night, they had gone to some dance. In between dances his girlfriend had said, ‘What’s that?’

‘What’s what?’

‘There’s something sticking out of your pant cuff.’

‘What?’

‘My goodness! You’re wearing your *pajamas* underneath your pants!’

‘Oh? Oh, that … I must have forgotten …’

‘I’m leaving right now!’

She never dated him again.

All the guys were changing into their gym clothes. Then Baldy walked in and opened his locker.

‘How ya doing, pal?’ I asked him.

‘Oh, hello, Hank …’

‘I’ve got a 7 a.m. English class. It really starts the day out right. Only they ought to call it *Music Appreciation I*.’

‘Oh yeah. Hamilton. I’ve heard of him. Hee hee hee …’

I walked over to him.

Baldy had unbuckled his pants. I reached over and yanked his pants down. Underneath were green striped pajamas. He tried to yank his pants back up but I was too strong for him.

‘HEY, FELLOWS, LOOK! JESUS CHRIST, HERE’S A GUY WHO WEARS HIS PAJAMAS TO SCHOOL!’

Baldy was struggling. His face was florid. A couple of guys walked over and looked. Then I did the worst. I yanked his pajamas down.

‘AND LOOKY HERE! THE POOR FUCKER IS NOT ONLY BALD BUT HE DOESN’T HARDLY HAVE A COCK! WHAT IS THIS POOR FUCKER GOING TO DO WHEN HE CONFRONTS A WOMAN?’

Some big guy standing nearby said, ‘Chinaski, you’re really a piece of shit!’

‘Yeah,’ said a couple of other guys. ‘Yeah … yeah …’ I heard other voices.

Baldy pulled his pants up. He was actually crying. He looked at the guys. ‘Well, Chinaski wears pajamas too! *He* was the guy who started me doing it! Look in his locker, just look in his locker!’

Baldy ran down to my locker and ripped the door open. He pulled all my clothing out. The pajamas weren’t in there.

‘He’s hidden them! He’s hidden them somewhere!’

I left my clothes on the floor and walked out on the field for roll-call. I stood in the second row. I did a couple of deep knee bends. I noticed another big guy behind me. I’d heard his name around, Sholom Stodolsky.

‘Chinaski,’ he said, ‘you’re a piece of shit.’

‘Don’t mess with me, man, I’ve got an edgy nature.’

‘Well, I’m messing with you.’

‘Don’t push me too far, fat boy.’

‘You know the place between the Biology Building and the tennis courts?’

‘I’ve seen it.’

‘I’ll meet you there after gym.’

‘OK,’ I said.

I didn’t show up. After gym I cut the rest of my classes and took the streetcars down to Pershing Square. I sat on a bench and waited for some action. It seemed a long time coming. Finally a Religionist and an Atheist got into it. They weren’t much good. I was an Agnostic. Agnostics didn’t have much to argue about. I left the park and walked down to 7th and Broadway. That was the center of town. There didn’t seem to be much doing there, just people waiting for the signals to change so they could cross the street. Then I noticed my legs were starting to itch. I had left my pajamas on top of the locker. What a fucking lousy day it had been from beginning to end. I hopped a ‘W’ streetcar and sat in the back as it rolled along carrying me back toward home.

51

I only met one student at City College that I liked, Robert Becker. He wanted to be a writer. ‘I’m going to learn everything there is to learn about writing. It will be like taking a car apart and putting it back together again.’

‘Sounds like work,’ I said.

‘I’m going to do it.’

Becker was an inch or so shorter than I was but he was stocky, he was powerfully built, with big shoulders and arms.

‘I had a childhood disease,’ he told me. ‘I had to lay in bed one time for a year squeezing two tennis balls, one in each hand. Just from doing that, I got to be like this.’

He had a job as a messenger boy at night and was putting himself through college.

‘How’d you get your job?’

‘I knew a guy who knew a guy.’

‘I’ll bet I can kick your ass.’

‘Maybe, maybe not. I’m only interested in writing.’

We were sitting in an alcove overlooking the lawn. Two guys were staring at me.

Then one of them spoke. ‘Hey,’ he asked me, ‘do you mind if I ask you something?’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Well, you used to be a sissy in grammar school, I remember you. And now you’re a tough guy. What happened?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Are you a cynic?’

‘Probably.’

‘Are you happy being a cynic?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then you’re not a cynic because cynics aren’t happy!’

The two guys did a little vaudeville handshake act and ran off, laughing.

‘They made you look bad,’ said Becker.

‘No, they were trying too hard.’

‘*Are* you a cynic?’

‘I’m unhappy. If I was a cynic it would probably make me feel better.’

We hopped down from the alcove. Classes were over. Becker wanted to put his books in his locker. We walked there and he dumped them in. He handed me five or six sheets of paper.

‘Here read this. It’s a short story.’

We walked down to my locker. I opened it and handed him a paper bag.

‘Take a hit …’

It was a bottle of port.

Becker took a hit, then I took one.

‘You always keep one of these in your locker?’ he asked.

‘I try to.’

‘Listen, tonight’s my night off. Why don’t you come meet some of my friends?’

‘People don’t do me much good.’

‘These are different people.’

‘Yeah? Where at? Your place?’

‘No. Here, I’ll write down the address …’ He began writing on a piece of paper.

‘Listen, Becker, what do these people do?’

‘Drink,’ said Becker.

I put the slip into my pocket …

That night after dinner I read Becker’s short story. It was good and I was jealous. It was about riding his bike at night and then delivering a telegram to a beautiful woman. The writing was objective and clear, there was a gentle decency about it. Becker claimed Thomas Wolfe as an influence but he didn’t wail and ham it up like Wolfe did. The emotion was there but it wasn’t spelled out in neon. Becker could write, he could write better than I could.

My parents had gotten me a typewriter and I had tried some short stories but they had come out very bitter and ragged. Not that that was so bad but the stories seemed to beg, they didn’t have their own vitality. My stories were darker than Becker’s, stranger, but they didn’t work. Well, one or two of them had worked – for me – but it was more or less as if they had fallen into place instead of being guided there. Becker was clearly better. Maybe I’d try painting.

I waited until my parents were asleep. My father always snored loudly. When I heard him I opened the bedroom screen and slid out over the berry bush. That put me into the neighbor’s driveway and I walked slowly in the dark. Then I walked up Longwood to 21st Street, took a right, then went up the hill along Westview to where the ‘W’ car ended its route. I dropped my token in and walked to the rear of the car, sat down and lit a cigarette. If Becker’s friends were anywhere as good as Becker’s short story it was going to be one hell of a night.

Becker was already there by the time I found the Beacon Street address. His friends were in the breakfast nook. I was introduced. There was Harry, there was Lana, there was Gobbles, there was Stinky, there was Marshbird, there was Ellis, there was Dogface and finally there was The Ripper. They all sat around a large breakfast table. Harry had a legitimate job somewhere, he and Becker were the only ones employed. Lana was Harry’s wife, Gobbles their baby was sitting in a highchair. Lana was the only woman there. When we were introduced she had looked right at me and smiled. They were all young, thin, and puffed at rolled cigarettes.

‘Becker told us about you,’ said Harry. ‘He says you’re a writer.’

‘I’ve got a typewriter.’

‘You gonna write about us?’ asked Stinky.

‘I’d rather drink.’

‘Fine. We’re going to have a drinking contest. Got any money?’ Stinky asked.

‘Two dollars …’

‘OK, the ante is two dollars. Everybody up!’ Harry said.

That made eighteen dollars. The money looked good laying there. A bottle appeared and then shot glasses.

‘Becker told us you think you’re a tough guy. Are you a tough guy?’

'Yeah.'

'Well, we're gonna see …'

The kitchen light was very bright. It was straight whiskey. A dark yellow whiskey. Harry poured the drinks. Such beauty. My mouth, my throat, couldn't wait. The radio was on. *Oh, Johnny, oh Johnny, how you can love!* somebody sang.

'Down the hatch!' said Harry.

There was no way I could lose. I could drink for days. I had never had enough to drink.

Gobbles had a tiny shot glass of his own. As we raised ours and drank them, he raised his and drank. Everybody thought it was funny. I didn't think it was so funny for a baby to drink but I didn't say anything.

Harry poured another round.

'You read my short story, Hank?' Becker asked.

'Yeah.'

'How'd you like it?'

'It was good. You're ready now. All you need is some luck.'

'Down the hatch!' said Harry.

The second round was no problem, we all got it down, including Lana.

Harry looked at me. 'You like to duke it, Hank?'

'No.'

'Well, in case you do, we got Dogface here.'

Dogface was twice my size. It was so wearisome being in the world. Every time you looked around there was some guy ready to take you on without even inhaling. I looked at Dogface. 'Hi, buddy!'

'Buddy, my ass,' he said. 'Just get your next drink down.'

Harry poured them all around. He skipped Gobbles in the highchair, though, which I appreciated. All right, we raised them, we all got that round down. Then Lana dropped out.

'Somebody's got to clean up this mess and get Harry ready for work in the morning,' she said.

The next round was poured. Just as it was the door banged open and a large good-looking kid of around 22 came running into the room. ‘*Shit, Harry*,’ he said, ‘*hide me! I just held up a fucking gas station!*’

‘My car’s in the garage,’ Harry said. ‘Get down on the floor in the back seat and stay there!’

We drank up. The next round was poured. A new bottle appeared. The eighteen dollars was still in the center of the table. We were still all hanging in there except Lana. It was going to take plenty of whiskey to do us in.

‘Hey,’ I asked Harry, ‘aren’t we going to run out of drinks?’

‘Show him, Lana …’

Lana pulled open some upper cupboard doors. I could see bottles and bottles of whiskey lined up, all the same brand. It looked like the loot from a truck hijack and it probably was. And these were the gang members: Harry, Lana, Stinky, Marshbird, Ellis, Dogface and The Ripper, maybe Becker, and most likely the young guy now on the floor in the back seat of Harry’s car. I felt honored to be drinking with such an active part of the population of Los Angeles. Becker not only knew how to write, Becker knew his people. I would dedicate my first novel to Robert Becker. And it would be a better novel than *Of Time and the River*.

Harry kept pouring the rounds and we kept drinking them down. The kitchen was blue with cigarette smoke.

Marshbird dropped out first. He had a very large nose, he just shook his head, no more, no more, and all you could see was this long nose waving ‘no’ in the blue smoke.

Ellis was the next to drop out. He had a lot of hair on his chest but evidently not much on his balls.

Dogface was next. He just jumped up and ran to the crapper and puked. Listening to him Harry got the same idea and leaped up and puked in the sink.

That left me, Becker, Stinky and The Ripper.

Becker quit next. He just folded his arms on the table, put his head down in his arms and that was it.

‘The night’s so young,’ I said. ‘I usually drink until the sun comes up.’

'Yeah,' said The Ripper, 'you shit in a basket too!'

'Yeah, and it's shaped like your head.'

The Ripper stood up. 'You son-of-a-bitch, I'll bust your ass!'

He swung at me from across the table, missed and knocked over the bottle. Lana got a rag and mopped it up. Harry opened a bottle.

'Sit down, Rip, or you forfeit your bet,' Harry said.

Harry poured a new round. We drank them down.

The Ripper stood up, walked to the rear door, opened it and looked out into the night.

'Hey, Rip, what the hell you doing?' Stinky asked.

'I'm checking to see if there's a full moon.'

'Well, is there?'

There was no answer. We heard him fall through the door, down the steps and into the bushes. We left him there.

That left me and Stinky.

'I've never seen anybody take Stinky yet,' said Harry.

Lana had just put Gobbles to bed. She walked back into the kitchen. 'Jesus, there are dead bodies all over the place.'

'Pour 'em, Harry,' I said.

Harry filled Stinky's glass, then mine. I knew there was no way I could get that drink down. I did the only thing I could do. I pretended it was easy. I grabbed the shot glass and belted it down. Stinky just stared at me. 'I'll be right back. I gotta go to the crapper.'

We sat and waited.

'Stinky's a nice guy,' I said. 'You shouldn't call him Stinky. How'd he get that name?'

'I dunno,' said Harry, 'somebody just laid it on him.'

'That guy in the back of your car. He ever going to come out?'

'Not till morning.'

We sat and waited. 'I think,' said Harry, 'we better take a look.'

We opened the bathroom door. Stinky didn't appear to be in there. Then we saw him. He had fallen into the bathtub. His feet stuck up over the edge. His eyes were closed, he was down in there, and out. We walked back to the table. ‘The money’s yours,’ said Harry.

‘How about letting me pay for some of those bottles of whiskey?’

‘Forget it.’

‘You mean it?’

‘Yes, of course.’

I picked up the money and put it in my right front pocket. Then I looked at Stinky’s drink.

‘No use wasting this,’ I said.

‘You mean you’re going to drink that?’ asked Lana.

‘Why not? One for the road …’

I gulped it down.

‘OK, see you guys, it’s been great!’

‘Goodnight, Hank …’

I walked out the back door, stepping over The Ripper’s body. I found a back alley and took a left. I walked along and I saw a green Chevy sedan. I staggered a bit as I approached it. I grabbed the rear door handle to steady myself. The goddamned door was unlocked and it swung open, knocking me sideways. I fell hard, skinning my left elbow on the pavement. There was a full moon. The whiskey had hit me all at once. I felt as if I couldn’t get up. I had to get up. I was supposed to be a tough guy. I rose, fell against the half-open door, grabbed at it, held it. Then I had the inside handle and was steadying myself. I got myself into the back seat and then I just sat there. I sat there for some time. Then I started to puke. It really came. It came and it came, it covered the rear floorboard. Then I sat for a while. Then I managed to get out of the car. I didn’t feel as dizzy. I took out my handkerchief and wiped the vomit off my pant legs and off of my shoes as best I could. I closed the car door and walked on down the alley. I had to find the ‘W’ streetcar. I would find it.

I did. I rode it in. I made it down Westview Street, walked down 21st Street, turned south down Longwood Avenue to 2122. I walked up the neighbor’s driveway, found the berry bush, crawled over it, through the open screen and into my bedroom. I undressed and went to bed. I must have consumed over a quart of whiskey. My father was still snoring, just as he had been when I had left, only at the moment it was louder and uglier. I slept anyhow.

As usual I approached Mr Hamilton's English class thirty minutes late. It was 7.30 a.m. I stood outside the door and listened. They were at Gilbert and Sullivan again. And it was still all about going to the sea and the Queen's Navy. Hamilton couldn't get enough of that. In high school I'd had an English teacher and it had been Poe, Poe, Edgar Allan Poe.

I opened the door. Hamilton went over and lifted the needle from the record. Then he announced to the class, 'When Mr Chinaski arrives we always know that it is 7.30 a.m. Mr Chinaski is *always* on time. The only problem being that it is the *wrong* time.'

He paused, glancing at the faces in his class. He was very, very dignified. Then he looked at me.

'Mr Chinaski, whether you arrive at 7.30 a.m. or whether you arrive at all will not matter. I am assigning you a "D" for *English I*.'

'A "D," Mr Hamilton?' I asked, flashing my famous sneer. 'Why not an "F"?'

'Because "F," at times, equates with "Fuck." And I don't think you're worth a "Fuck."'

The class cheered and roared and stomped and stamped. I turned around, walked out, closed the door behind me. I walked down the hallway, still hearing them going at it in there.

52

The war was going very well in Europe, for Hitler. Most of the students weren't very vocal on the matter. But the instructors were, they were almost all left-wing and anti-German. There seemed to be no right-wing faction among the instructors except for Mr Glasglow, in Economics, and he was very discreet about it.

It was intellectually popular and proper to be for going to war with Germany, to stop the spread of fascism. As for me, I had no desire to go to war to protect the life I had or what future I might have. I had no Freedom. I had nothing. With Hitler around, maybe I'd even get a piece of ass now and then and more than a dollar a week allowance. As far as I could rationalize, I had nothing to protect. Also, having been born in Germany, there was a natural loyalty and I didn't like to see the whole German nation, the people, depicted everywhere as monsters and idiots. In the movie theatres they speeded up the newsreels to make Hitler and Mussolini look like frenetic madmen. Also, with all the instructors being anti-German I found it personally impossible to simply agree with them. Out of sheer alienation and a natural contrariness I decided to align myself against their point of view. I had never read *Mein Kampf* and had no desire to do so. Hitler was just another dictator to me, only instead of lecturing me at the dinner table he'd probably blow my brains out or my balls off if I went to war to stop him.

Sometimes as the instructors talked on and on about the evils of nazism (we were told always to spell 'nazi' with a small 'n' even at the beginning of a sentence) and fascism I would leap to my feet and make something up: 'The survival of the human race depends upon selective accountability!'

Which meant, watch out who you go to bed with, but only I knew that. It really pissed everybody off.

I don't know where I got my stuff:

‘One of the failures of Democracy is that the common vote guarantees a common leader who then leads us to a common apathetic predictability!’

I avoided any direct reference to Jews and Blacks, who had never given me any trouble. All my troubles had come from white gentiles. Thus, I wasn’t a nazi by temperament or choice; the teachers more or less forced it on me by being so much alike and thinking so much alike and with their anti-German prejudice. I had also read somewhere that if a man didn’t truly believe or understand what he was espousing, somehow he could do a more convincing job, which gave me a considerable advantage over the teachers.

‘Breed a plow horse to a race horse and you get an offspring that is neither swift nor strong. A new Master Race will evolve from purposeful breeding!’

‘There are no good wars or bad wars. The only thing bad about a war is to lose it. All wars have been fought for a so-called good Cause on both sides. But only the victor’s Cause becomes history’s Noble Cause. It’s not a matter of who is right or who is wrong, it’s a matter of who has the best generals and the better army!’

I loved it. I could make up anything I liked.

Of course, I was talking myself further and further away from any chance with the girls. But I had never been that close anyhow. I figured because of my wild speeches I was alone on campus but it wasn’t so. Some others had been listening. One day, walking to my Current Affairs class, I heard somebody walking up behind me. I never liked anybody walking behind me, not close. So I turned as I walked. It was the student body president, Boyd Taylor. He was very popular with the students, the only man in the history of the college to have been elected president twice.

‘Hey, Chinaski, I want to talk to you.’

I’d never cared too much for Boyd, he was the typical good-looking American youth with a guaranteed future, always properly dressed, casual, smooth, every hair of his black mustache trimmed. What his appeal was to the student body, I had no idea. He walked along beside me.

'Don't you think it looks bad for you, Boyd, to be seen walking with me?'

'I'll worry about that.'

'All right. What is it?'

'Chinaski, this is just between you and me, got it?'

'Sure.'

'Listen, I don't believe in what guys like you stand for or what you're trying to do.'

'So?'

'But I want you to know that if you win here and in Europe I'm willing to join your side.'

I could only look at him and laugh.

He stood there as I walked on. Never trust a man with a perfectly-trimmed mustache…

Other people had been listening as well. Coming out of Current Affairs I ran into Baldy standing there with a guy five feet tall and three feet wide. The guy's head was sunk down into his shoulders, he had a very round head, small ears, cropped hair, pea eyes, tiny wet round mouth.

A nut, I thought, a killer.

'HEY, HANK!' Baldy hollered.

I walked over. 'I thought we were finished, LaCrosse.'

'Oh no! There are *great* things still to do!'

Shit! Baldy was one too!

Why did the Master Race movement draw nothing but mental and physical cripples?

'I want you to meet Igor Stirnov.'

I reached out and we shook hands. He squeezed mine with all his strength. It really hurt.

'Let go,' I said, 'or I'll bust your fucking missing neck!'

Igor let go. 'I don't trust men with limp handshakes. Why do you have a limp handshake?'

'I'm weak today. They burned my toast for breakfast and at lunch I spilled my chocolate milk.'

Igor turned to Baldy. ‘What’s with this guy?’

‘Don’t worry about him. He’s got his own ways.’

Igor looked at me again.

‘My grandfather was a White Russian. During the Revolution the Reds killed him. I must get even with those bastards!’

‘I see.’

Then another student came walking toward us. ‘Hey, Fenster!’ Baldy hollered.

Fenster walked up. We shook hands. I gave him a limp one. I didn’t like to shake hands. Fenster’s first name was Bob. There was to be a meeting at a house in Glendale, the Americans for America Party. Fenster was the campus representative. He walked off. Baldy leaned over and whispered into my ear, ‘They’re Nazis!’

Igor had a car and a gallon of rum. We met in front of Baldy’s house. Igor passed the bottle. Good stuff, it really burned the membranes of the throat. Igor drove his car like a tank, right through stop signals. People blew their horns and slammed on their brakes and he waved a fake black pistol at them.

‘Hey, Igor,’ said Baldy, ‘show Hank your pistol.’

Igor was driving. Baldy and I were in the back. Igor passed me his pistol. I looked at it.

‘It’s great!’ Baldy said. ‘He carved it out of wood and stained it with black shoe polish. Looks real, doesn’t it?’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘He’s even drilled a hole in the barrel.’

I handed the gun back to Igor. ‘Very nice,’ I said.

He handed back the jug of rum. I took a hit and handed the bottle to Baldy. He looked at me and said, ‘Heil Hitler!’

We were the last to arrive. It was a large handsome house. We were met at the door by a fat smiling boy who looked like he had spent a lifetime eating chestnuts by the fire. His parents didn’t seem to be about. His name was Larry Kearny. We followed him through the big house and down a long dark stairway. All I could see was Kearny’s shoulders and head. He was certainly a well-fed fellow and looked to be far saner than

Baldy, Igor or myself. Maybe there would be something to learn here.

Then we were in the cellar. We found some chairs. Fenster nodded to us. There were seven others there whom I didn't know. There was a desk on a raised platform. Larry walked up and stood behind the desk. Behind him on the wall was a large American flag. Larry stood very straight. 'We will now pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America!'

My god, I thought, I am in the wrong place!

We stood and took the pledge, but I stopped after 'I pledge allegiance …' I didn't say to what.

We sat down. Larry started talking from behind the desk. He explained that since this was the first meeting, he would preside. After two or three meetings, after we got to know one another, a president could be elected if we wished. But meanwhile …

'We face here, in America, two threats to our liberty. We face the communist scourge and the black takeover. Most often they work hand in hand. We true Americans will gather here in an attempt to counter this scourge, this menace. It has gotten so that no decent white girl can walk the streets anymore without being accosted by a black male!'

Igor leaped up. 'We'll kill them!'

'The communists want to divide the wealth for which we have worked so long, which our fathers labored for, and *their* fathers before them worked for. The communists want to give our money to every black man, homo, bum, murderer and child molester who walks our streets!'

'We'll kill them!'

'They must be stopped.'

'We'll arm!'

'Yes, we'll arm! And we'll meet here and formulate a master plan to save America!'

The fellows cheered. Two or three of them yelled, 'Heil Hitler!' Then the get-to-know-each-other time arrived.

Larry passed out cold beers and we stood around in little groups talking, not much being said, except we reached a general agreement that we needed target practice so that we would be expert with our guns when the time came.

When we got back to Igor's house his parents didn't seem to be about, either. Igor got out a frying pan, put in four cubes of butter, and began to melt them. He took the rum, put it in a large pot and warmed it up.

'This is what men drink,' he said. Then he looked at Baldy. 'Are you a man, Baldy?'

Baldy was already drunk. He stood very straight, hands down at his sides. 'YES, I'M A MAN!' He started to weep. The tears came rolling down. 'I'M A MAN!' He stood very straight and yelled, 'HEIL HITLER!' the tears rolling.

Igor looked at me. 'Are you a man?'

'I don't know. Is that rum ready?'

'I'm not sure I trust you. I'm not so sure that you are one of us. Are you a counter-spy? Are you an enemy agent?'

'No.'

'Are you one of us?'

'I don't know. Only one thing I'm sure of.'

'What's that?'

'I don't like you. Is the rum ready?'

'You *see?*' said Baldy. 'I told you he was mean!'

'We'll see who is the meanest before the night is ended,' said Igor.

Igor poured the melted butter into the boiling rum, then shut off the flame and stirred. I didn't like him but he certainly was different and I liked that. Then he found three drinking cups, large, blue, with Russian writing on them. He poured the buttered rum into the cups.

'OK,' he said, 'drink up!'

'Shit, it's about time,' I said and I let it slide down. It was a little too hot and it stank.

I watched Igor drink his. I saw his little pea eyes over the rim of his cup. He managed to get it down, driblets of golden buttered rum leaking out of the corners of his stupid mouth. He was looking at Baldy. Baldy was standing, staring down into his cup. I knew from the old days that Baldy just didn't have a natural love of drinking.

Igor stared at Baldy. 'Drink up!'

'Yes, Igor, yes …'

Baldy lifted the blue cup. He was having a difficult time. It was too hot for him and he didn't like the taste. Half of it ran out of his mouth and over his chin and onto his shirt. His empty cup fell to the kitchen floor.

Igor squared himself in front of Baldy.

'You're not a man!'

'I AM A MAN, IGOR! I AM A MAN!'

'YOU LIE!'

Igor backhanded him across the face and as Baldy's head jumped to one side, he straightened him up with a slap to the other side of his face. Baldy stood at attention with his hands rigidly at his sides.

'I'm … a man …'

Igor continued to stand in front of him.

'I'll *make* a man out of you!'

'OK,' I said to Igor, 'leave him alone.'

Igor left the kitchen. I poured myself another rum. It was dreadful stuff but it was all there was.

Igor walked back in. He was holding a gun, a real one, an old six-shooter.

'We will now play Russian roulette,' he announced.

'Your mother's ass,' I said.

'I'll play, Igor,' said Baldy, 'I'll play! I'm a *man!*'

'All right,' said Igor, 'there is one bullet in the gun. I will spin the chamber and hand the gun to you.'

Igor spun the chamber and handed the gun to Baldy. Baldy took it and pointed it at his head. 'I'm a man … I'm a man … I'll do it!'

He began crying again. 'I'll do it … I'm a man …'

Baldy let the muzzle of the gun slip away from his temple. He pointed it away from his skull and pulled the trigger. There was a click.

Igor took the gun, spun the chamber and handed it to me. I handed it back.

'You go first.'

Igor spun the chamber, held the gun up to the light and looked through the chamber. Then he put the gun to his temple and pulled the trigger. There was a click.

'Big deal,' I said. 'You checked the chamber to see where the bullet was.'

Igor spun the chamber and handed the gun to me. 'Your turn …'

I handed the gun back. 'Stuff it,' I told him.

I walked over to pour myself another rum. As I did there was a shot. I looked down. Near my foot, in the kitchen floor, there was a bullet hole.

I turned around.

'You ever point that thing at me again and I'll kill you, Igor.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah.'

He stood there smiling. He slowly began to raise the gun. I waited. Then he lowered the gun. That was about it for the night. We went out to the car and Igor drove us home. But we stopped first at Westlake Park and rented a boat and went out on the lake to finish off the rum. With the last drink, Igor loaded up the gun and shot holes in the bottom of the boat. We were forty yards from shore and had to swim in …

It was late when I got home. I crawled over the old berry bush and through the bedroom window. I undressed and went to bed while in the next room my father snored.

53

I was coming home from classes down Westview hill. I never had any books to carry. I passed my exams by listening to the class lectures and by guessing at the answers. I never had to cram for exams. I could get my ‘C’s.’ And as I was coming down the hill I ran into a giant spider web. I was always doing that. I stood there pulling the sticky web from myself and looking for the spider. Then I saw him: a big fat black son-of-a-bitch. I crushed him. I had learned to hate spiders. When I went to hell I would be eaten by a spider.

All my life, in that neighborhood, I had been walking into spider webs, I had been attacked by blackbirds, I had lived with my father. Everything was eternally dreary, dismal, damned. Even the weather was insolent and bitchy. It was either unbearably hot for weeks on end, or it rained, and when it rained it rained for five or six days. The water came up over the lawns and poured into the houses. Who’d ever planned the drainage system had probably been well paid for his ignorance about such matters.

And my own affairs were as bad, as dismal, as the day I had been born. The only difference was that now I could drink now and then, though never often enough. Drink was the only thing that kept a man from feeling forever stunned and useless. Everything else just kept picking and picking, hacking away. And nothing was interesting, nothing. The people were restrictive and careful, all alike. And I’ve got to live with these fuckers for the rest of my life, I thought. God, they all had assholes and sexual organs and their mouths and their armpits. They shit and they chattered and they were dull as horse dung. The girls looked good from a distance, the sun shining through their dresses, their hair. But get up close and listen to their minds running out of their mouths, you felt like digging in under a hill and hiding out with a tommy-gun. I would certainly never be able to be happy, to get married, I could never have children. Hell, I couldn't even get a job as a dish-washer.

Maybe I'd be a bank robber. Some god-damned thing. Something with flare, fire. You only had one shot. Why be a window-washer?

I lit a cigarette and walked further down the hill. Was I the only person who was distracted by this future without a chance?

I saw another one of those big black spiders. He was about face-high, in his web, right in my path. I took my cigarette and placed it against him. The tremendous web shook and leaped as he jumped, the branches of the bush trembled. He leaped out of the web and fell to the sidewalk. Cowardly killers, the whole bunch of them. I crushed him with my shoe. A worthwhile day, I had killed two spiders, I had upset the balance of nature – now we would all be eaten up by the bugs and the flies.

I walked further down the hill, I was near the bottom when a large bush began to shake. The King Spider was after me. I strode forward to meet it.

My mother leaped out from behind the bush. '*Henry, Henry*, don't go home, don't go home, your father will kill you!'

'How's he going to do that? I can whip his ass.'

'No, he's *furious*, Henry! Don't go home, he'll kill you! I've been waiting here for hours!'

My mother's eyes were wide with fear and quite beautiful, large and brown.

'What's he doing home this early?'

'He had a headache, he got the afternoon off!'

'I thought you were working, that you'd found a new job?'

She'd gotten a job as a housekeeper.

'He came and got me! He's *furious!* He'll *kill you!*'

'Don't worry, Mom, if he messes with me I'll kick his god-damned ass, I promise you.'

'*Henry, he found your short stories and he read them!*'

'I never asked him to read them.'

'*He found them in a drawer! He read them, he read all of them!*'

I had written ten or twelve short stories. Give a man a typewriter and he becomes a writer. I had hidden the stories under the paper lining of my shorts-and-stockings drawer.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘the old man poked around and he got his fingers burned.’

‘*He said that he was going to kill you! He said that no son of his could write stories like that and live under the same roof with him!*’

I took her by the arm. ‘Let’s go home, Mom, and see what he does …’

‘*Henry, he’s thrown all your clothes out on the front lawn, all your dirty laundry, your typewriter, your suitcase and your stories!*’

‘My stories?’

‘Yes, those too …’

‘*I’ll kill him!*’

I pulled away from her and walked across 21st Street and toward Longwood Avenue. She went after me.

‘*Henry, Henry, don’t go in there.*’

The poor woman was yanking at the back of my shirt.

‘Henry, listen, get yourself a room somewhere! Henry, I have ten dollars! Take this ten dollars and get yourself a room somewhere!’

I turned. She was holding out the ten.

‘Forget it,’ I said. ‘I’ll just go.’

‘Henry, take the money! Do it for me! Do it for your mother!’

‘Well, all right …’

I took the ten, put it in my pocket.

‘Thanks, that’s a lot of money.’

‘It’s all right, Henry. I love you, Henry, but you must go.’

She ran ahead of me as I walked toward the house. Then I saw it: everything was strewn across the lawn, all my dirty and clean clothes, the suitcase flung there open, socks, shirts, pajamas, an old robe, everything flung everywhere, on the lawn and into the street. And I saw my manuscripts being blown in the wind, they were in the gutter, everywhere.

My mother ran up the driveway to the house and I screamed after her so he could hear me, ‘TELL HIM TO COME OUT HERE

AND I'LL KNOCK HIS GOD-DAMNED HEAD OFF!'

I went after my manuscripts first. That was the lowest of the blows, doing that to me. They were the one thing he had no right to touch. As I picked up each page from the gutter, from the lawn and from the street, I began to feel better. I found every page I could, placed them in the suitcase under the weight of a shoe, then rescued the typewriter. It had broken out of its case but it looked all right. I looked at my rags scattered about. I left the dirty laundry, I left the pajamas, which were only a handed-down pair of his discards. There wasn't much else to pack. I closed the suitcase, picked it up with the typewriter and started to walk away. I could see two faces peering after me from behind the drapes. But I quickly forgot that, walked up Longwood, across 21st and up old Westview hill. I didn't feel much different than I had always felt. I was neither elated nor dejected; it all seemed to be just a continuation. I was going to take the 'W' streetcar, get a transfer, and go somewhere downtown.

54

I found a room on Temple Street in the Filipino district. It was $3.50 a week, upstairs on the second floor. I paid the landlady – a middle-aged blond – a week's rent. The toilet and tub were down the hall but there was a wash basin to piss in.

My first night there I discovered a bar downstairs just to the right of the entrance. I liked that. All I had to do was climb the stairway and I was home. The bar was full of little dark men but they didn't bother me. I'd heard all the stories about Filipinos – that they liked white girls, blonds in particular, that they carried stilettoes, that since they were all the same size, seven of them would chip in and buy one expensive suit, with all the accessories, and they would take turns wearing the suit one night a week. George Raft had said somewhere that Filipinos set the style trends. They stood on street corners and swung golden chains around and around, thin golden chains, seven or eight inches long, each man's chain-length indicating the length of his penis.

The bartender was Filipino.

'You're new, huh?' he asked.

'I live upstairs. I'm a student.'

'No credit.'

I put some coins down.

'Give me an Eastside.'

He came back with the bottle.

'Where can a fellow get a girl?' I asked.

He picked up some of the coins.

'I don't know anything,' he said and walked to the register.

That first night I closed the bar. Nobody bothered me. A few blond women left with the Filipinos. The men were quiet drinkers. They sat in little groups with their heads close together, talking, now and then laughing in a very quiet manner. I liked them. When the bar closed and I got up to leave the bartender said, 'Thank you.' That was never done in American bars, not to me anyhow.

I liked my new situation. All I needed was money.

I decided to keep going to college. It would give me some place to be during the daytime. My friend Becker had dropped out. There wasn't anybody that I much cared for there except maybe the instructor in Anthropology, a known Communist. He didn't teach much Anthropology. He was a large man, casual and likeable.

'Now the way you fry a porterhouse steak,' he told the class, 'you get the pan red hot, you drink a shot of whiskey and then you pour a thin layer of salt in the pan. You drop the steak in and sear it but not for too long. Then you flip it, sear the other side, drink another shot of whiskey, take the steak out and eat it immediately.'

Once when I was stretched out on the campus lawn he had come walking by and had stopped and stretched out beside me.

'Chinaski, you don't believe all that Nazi hokum you're spreading around, do you?'

'I'm not saying. Do you believe your crap?'

'Of course I do.'

'Good luck.'

'Chinaski, you're nothing but a wienerschnitzel.'

He got up, brushed off the grass and leaves and walked away …

I had been at the Temple Street place only for a couple of days when Jimmy Hatcher found me. He knocked on the door one night and I opened it and there he was with two other guys, fellow aircraft workers, one called Delmore, the other, Fastshoes.

'How come he's called "Fastshoes"?'

'You ever lend him money, you'll know.'

'Come on in… How in Christ's name did you find me?'

'Your folks had you traced by a private dick.'

'Damn, they know how to take the joy out of a man's life.'

'Maybe they're worried?'

'If they're worried all they have to do is send money.'

'They claim you'll drink it up.'

‘Then let them worry …’

The three of them came in and sat around on the bed and the floor. They had a fifth of whiskey and some paper cups. Jimmy poured all around.

‘Nice place you’ve got here.’

‘It’s great. I can see the City Hall every time I stick my head out the window.’

Fastshoes pulled a deck of cards from his pocket. He was sitting on the rug. He looked up at me.

‘You gamble?’

‘Every day. You got a marked deck?’

‘Hey, you son-of-a-bitch!’

‘Don’t curse me or I’ll hang your wig on my mantlepiece.’

‘Honest, man, these cards are straight!’

‘All I play is poker and 21. What’s the limit?’

‘Two bucks.’

‘We’ll split for the deal.’

I got the deal and called for draw poker, regular. I didn’t like wild cards, too much luck was needed that way. Two bits for the kitty. As I dealt, Jimmy poured another round.

‘How are you making it, Hank?’

‘I’m writing term papers for the other people.’

‘Brilliant.’

‘Yeah …’

‘Hey, you guys,’ said Jimmy, ‘I told you this guy was a genius.’

‘Yeah,’ said Delmore. He was to my right. He opened.

‘Two bits,’ he said.

We followed him in.

‘Three cards,’ said Delmore.

‘One,’ said Jimmy.

‘Three,’ said Fastshoes.

‘I’ll stand,’ I said.

‘Two bits,’ said Delmore.

We all stayed in and then I said, ‘I’ll see your two bits and raise you two bucks.’

Delmore dropped out, Jimmy dropped out. Fastshoes looked at me. ‘What else do you see besides City Hall when you stick your head out the window?’

‘Just play your hand. I’m not here to chat about gymnastics or the scenery.’

‘All right,’ he said, ‘I’m out.’

I scooped up the pot and gathered in their cards, leaving mine face down.

‘What did ya have?’ asked Fastshoes.

‘Pay to see or weep forever,’ I said sweeping my cards into the deck and mixing them together, shuffling them, feeling like Gable before he got weakened by God at the time of the San Francisco earthquake.

The deck changed hands but my luck held, most of the time. It had been payday at the aircraft plant. Never bring a lot of money to where a poor man lives. He can only lose what little he has. On the other hand it is mathematically possible that he might win whatever you bring with you. What you must do, with money and the poor, is never let them get too close to one another.

Somehow I felt that the night was to be mine. Delmore soon tapped out and left.

‘Fellows,’ I said, ‘I’ve got an idea. Cards are too slow. Let’s just match coins, ten bucks a toss, odd man wins.’

‘OK,’ said Jimmy.

‘OK,’ said Fastshoes.

The whiskey was gone. We were into a bottle of my cheap wine.

‘All right,’ I said, ‘flip the coins high! Catch them on your palms. And when I say “lift,” we’ll check the result.’

We flipped them high. Caught them.

‘Lift!’ I said.

I was odd man. Shit. Twenty bucks, just like that.

I jammed the tens into my pocket.

‘Flip!’ I said. We did.

‘Lift!’ I said.

I won again.

‘Flip!’ I said.

‘Lift!’ I said.

Fastshoes won.

I got the next.

Then Jimmy won.

I got the next two.

‘Wait,’ I said, ‘I’ve got to piss!’

I walked over to the sink and pissed. We had finished the bottle of wine. I opened the closet door. ‘I got another bottle of wine in here,’ I told them.

I took most of the bills out of my pocket and threw them into the closet. I came out, opened the bottle, poured drinks all around.

‘Shit,’ said Fastshoes looking into his wallet, ‘I’m almost broke.’

‘Me too,’ said Jimmy.

‘I wonder who’s got the money?’ I asked.

They weren’t very good drinkers. Mixing the wine and the whiskey was bad for them. They were weaving a bit.

Fastshoes fell back against the dresser knocking an ashtray to the floor. It broke in half.

‘Pick it up,’ I said.

‘I won’t pick up shit,’ he said.

‘I said, “pick it up”!’

‘I won’t pick up shit.’

Jimmy reached and picked up the broken ashtray.

‘You guys get out of here,’ I said.

‘You can’t make me go,’ said Fastshoes.

‘All right,’ I said, ‘just open your mouth *one* more time, say *one* word and you won’t be able to separate your head from your asshole!’

‘Let’s go, Fastshoes,’ said Jimmy.

I opened the door and they filed past unsteadily. I followed them down the hall to the head of the stairway. We stood there.

‘Hank,’ said Jimmy, ‘I’ll see you again. Take it easy.’

‘All right, Jim …’

‘Listen,’ Fastshoes said to me, ‘You…’

I shot a straight right into his mouth. He fell backward down the stairway, twisting and bouncing. He was about my size, six feet and one-eighty, and you could hear the sound of him for a block. Two Filipinos and the blond landlady were in the lobby. They looked at Fastshoes laying there but they didn’t move toward him.

‘You killed him!’ said Jimmy.

He ran down the stairway and turned Fastshoes over. Fastshoes had a bloody nose and mouth. Jimmy held his head. Jimmy looked up at me.

‘That wasn’t right, Hank …’

‘Yeah, what ya gonna do?’

‘I think,’ said Jimmy, ‘that we’re going to come back and get you …’

‘Wait a minute,’ I said.

I walked back to my room and poured myself a wine. I hadn’t liked Jimmy’s paper cups and I had been drinking out of a used jelly glass. The paper label was still on the side, stained with dirt and wine. I walked back out.

Fastshoes was reviving. Jimmy was helping him to his feet. Then he put Fastshoes’ arm around his neck. They were standing there.

‘Now what did you say?’ I asked.

‘You’re an ugly man, Hank. You need to be taught a lesson.’

‘You mean I’m not pretty?’

‘I mean, you *act* ugly …’

‘Take your friend out of here before I come down there and finish him off!’

Fastshoes raised his bloody head. He had on a flowered Hawaiian shirt, only now many of the colors were stained with red.

He looked at me. Then he spoke. I could barely hear him. But I heard it. He said, ‘I’m going to kill you …’

‘Yeah,’ said Jimmy, ‘we’ll get you.’

'YEAH, FUCKERS?' I screamed. 'I'M NOT GOING ANYWHERE! ANYTIME YOU WANT TO FIND ME I'LL BE IN ROOM 5! I'LL BE WAITING! ROOM 5, GOT IT? AND THE DOOR WILL BE OPEN!'

I lifted the jelly glass full of wine and drained it. Then I hurled that jelly glass at them. I threw the son-of-a-bitch, hard. But my aim was bad. It hit the side of the stairway wall, glanced off and shot into the lobby between the landlady and her two Filipino friends.

Jimmy turned Fastshoes toward the exit door and began slowly walking him out. It was a tedious, agonizing journey. I heard Fastshoes again, half moaning, half weeping, 'I'll kill him … I'll kill him …'

Then Jimmy had him out the doorway. They were gone.

The blond landlady and the two Filipinos were still standing in the lobby, looking up at me. I was barefooted, and had gone five or six days without a shave. I needed a haircut. I only combed my hair once, in the morning, then didn't bother again. My gym teachers were always after me about my posture: 'Pull your *shoulders* back! Why are you looking at the *ground?* What's down *there?*'

I would never set any trends or styles. My white t-shirt was stained with wine, burned, with many cigarettes and cigar holes, spotted with blood and vomit. It was too small, it rode up exposing my gut and belly button. And my pants were too small. They gripped me tightly and rose well above my ankles.

The three of them stood and looked at me. I looked down at them. 'Hey, you guys, come on up for a little drink!'

The two little men looked up at me and grinned. The landlady, a faded Carole Lombard type, looked on impassively. Mrs Kansas, they called her. Could she be in love with me? She was wearing pink shoes with high heels and a black sparkling sequinned dress. Little chips of light flashed at me. Her breasts were something that no mere mortal would ever see – they were only for kings, dictators, rulers, Filipinos.

'Anybody got a smoke?' I asked. 'I'm out of smokes.'

The little dark fellow standing to one side of Mrs Kansas made a slight motion with one hand toward his jacket pocket and a pack of Camels jumped in the lobby air. Deftly he caught the pack in his other hand. With the invisible tap of a finger on the bottom of the pack a smoke leaped up, tall, true, singular and exposed, ready to be taken.

'Hey, shit, thanks,' I said.

I started down the stairway, made a mis-step, lunged, almost fell, grabbed the bannister, righted myself, readjusted my perceptions, and walked on down. Was I drunk? I walked up to the little guy holding the pack. I bowed slightly.

I lifted out the Camel. Then I flipped it in the air, caught it, stuck it into my mouth. My dark friend remained expressionless, the grin having vanished when I had begun down the stairway. My little friend bent forward, cupped his hands around the flame and lit my smoke.

I inhaled, exhaled. 'Listen, why don't you all come up to my place and we'll have a couple of drinks?'

'No,' said the little guy who had lit my cigarette.

'Maybe we can catch the Bee or some Bach on my radio! I'm *educated*, you know. I'm a student …'

'No,' said the other little guy.

I took a big drag on my smoke, then looked at Carole Lombard – Mrs Kansas.

Then I looked at my two friends.

'She's *yours*. I don't want her. She's yours. Just come on up. We'll drink a little wine. In good old room 5.'

There was no answer. I rocked on my heels a bit as the whiskey and the wine fought for possession. I let my cigarette dangle a bit from the right side of my mouth as I sent up a plume of smoke. I continued letting the cigarette dangle like that.

I knew about stilettoes. In the little time I had been there I had seen two enactments of the stiletto. From my window one night, looking out at the sound of sirens, I saw a body there just below my window on the Temple Street sidewalk, in the moonlight, under the streetlight. Another time, another body.

Nights of the stiletto. Once a white man, the other time one of them. Each time, blood running on the pavement, real blood, just like that, moving across the pavement and into the gutter, you could see it going along in the gutter, meaningless, dumb … that so *much* blood could come from just one man.

‘All right, my friends,’ I said to them, ‘no hard feelings. I’ll drink alone …’

I turned and started to walk toward the stairway.

‘Mr Chinaski,’ I heard Mrs Kansas’ voice.

I turned and looked at her flanked by my two little friends.

‘Just go to your room and sleep. If you cause any more disturbance I will phone the Los Angeles Police Department.’

I turned and walked back up the stairway.

No life anywhere, no life in this town or this place or in this weary existence …

My door was open. I walked in. There was one-third of a cheap bottle of wine left.

Maybe there was another bottle in the closet?

I opened the closet door. No bottle. But there were tens and twenties everywhere. There was a rolled twenty lying between a pair of dirty socks with holes in the toes; and there from a shirt collar, a ten dangling; and here from an old jacket, another ten caught in a side pocket. Most of the money was on the floor.

I picked up a bill, slipped it into the side pocket of my pants, went to the door, closed and locked it, then went down the stairway to the bar.

55

A couple of nights later Becker walked in. I guess my parents gave him my address or he located me through the college. I had my name and address listed with the employment division at the college, under ‘unskilled labor.’ ‘I will do anything honest or otherwise,’ I had written on my card. No calls.

Becker sat in a chair as I poured the wine. He had on a Marine uniform.

‘I see they sucked you in,’ I said.

‘I lost my Western Union job. It was all that was left.’

I handed him his drink. ‘You’re not a patriot then?’

‘Hell no.’

‘Why the Marines?’

‘I heard about boot camp. I wanted to see if I could get through it.’

‘And you did.’

‘I did. There are some crazy guys there. There’s a fight almost every night. Nobody stops it. They almost kill each other.’

‘I like that.’

‘Why don’t you join?’

‘I don’t like to get up early in the morning and I don’t like to take orders.’

‘How are you going to make it?’

‘I don’t know. When I get down to my last dime I’ll just walk over to skid row.’

‘There are some real weirdos down there.’

‘They’re everywhere.’

I poured Becker another wine.

‘The problem is,’ he said, ‘that there’s not much time to write.’

‘You still want to be a writer?’

‘Sure. How about you?’

‘Yeah,’ I said, ‘but it’s pretty hopeless.’

‘You mean you’re not good enough?’

‘No, they’re not good enough.’

‘What do you mean?’

'You read the magazines? The "Best Short Stories of the Year" books? There are at least a dozen of them.'

'Yeah, I read them …'

'You read *The New Yorker? Harper's? The Atlantic?*'

'Yeah …'

'This is 1940. They're still publishing 19th-century stuff, heavy, labored, pretentious. You either get a headache reading the stuff or you fall asleep.'

'What's wrong?'

'It's a trick, it's a con, a little inside game.'

'Sounds like you've been rejected.'

'I knew I *would* be. Why waste the stamps? I need wine.'

'I'm going to break through,' said Becker. 'You'll see my books on the library shelves one day.'

'Let's not talk about writing.'

'I've read your stuff,' said Becker. 'You're too bitter and you hate everything.'

'Let's not talk about writing.'

'Now you take Thomas Wolfe …'

'God damn Thomas Wolfe! He sounds like an old woman on the telephone!'

'OK, who's your boy?'

'James Thurber.'

'All that upper-middle-class folderol …'

'He *knows* that everyone is crazy.'

'Thomas Wolfe is of the earth …'

'Only assholes talk about writing …'

'You calling me an asshole?'

'Yes …'

I poured him another wine and myself another wine.

'You're a fool for getting into that uniform.'

'You call me an asshole and you call me a fool. I thought we were friends.'

'We are. I just don't think you're protecting yourself.'

'Every time I see you you have a drink in your hand. You call *that* protecting yourself?'

‘It’s the best way I know. Without drink I would have long ago cut my god-damned throat.’

‘That’s bullshit.’

‘Nothing’s bullshit that works. The Pershing Square preachers have their God. I have the blood of my god!’

I raised my glass and drained it.

‘You’re just hiding from reality,’ Becker said.

‘Why not?’

‘You’ll never be a writer if you hide from reality.’

‘What are you talking about? That’s what writers *do!*’

Becker stood up. ‘When you talk to me, don’t raise your voice.’

‘What do you want to do, raise my dick?’

‘You don’t have a dick!’

I caught him unexpectedly with a right that landed behind his ear. The glass flew out of his hand and he staggered across the room. Becker was a powerful man, much stronger than I was. He hit the edge of the dresser, turned, and I landed another straight right to the side of his face. He staggered over near the window which was open and I was afraid to hit him then because he might fall into the street.

Becker gathered himself together and shook his head to clear it.

‘All right now,’ I said, ‘let’s have a little drink. Violence nauseates me.’

‘OK,’ said Becker.

He walked over and picked up his glass. The cheap wine I drank didn’t have corks, the tops just unscrewed. I unscrewed a new bottle. Becker held out his glass and I poured him one. I poured myself one, set the bottle down. Becker emptied his. I emptied mine.

‘No hard feelings,’ I said.

‘Hell, no, buddy,’ said Becker, putting down his glass. Then he dug a right into my gut. I doubled over and as I did he pushed down on the back of my head and brought his knee up into my face. I dropped to my knees, blood running from my nose all over my shirt.

‘Pour me a drink, buddy,’ I said, ‘let’s think this thing over.’

‘Get up,’ said Becker, ‘that was just chapter one.’

I got up and moved toward Becker. I blocked his jab, caught his right on my elbow, and punched a short straight right to his nose. Becker stepped back. We both had bloody noses.

I rushed him. We were both swinging blindly. I caught some good shots. He hit me with another good right to the belly. I doubled over but came up with an uppercut. It landed. It was a beautiful shot, a lucky shot. Becker lurched backwards and fell against the dresser. The back of his head hit the mirror. The mirror shattered. He was stunned. I had him. I grabbed him by the shirt front and hit him with a hard right behind his left ear. He dropped on the rug, and knelt there on all fours. I walked over and unsteadily poured myself a drink.

‘Becker,’ I told him, ‘I kick ass around here about twice a week. You just showed up on the wrong day.’

I emptied my glass. Becker got up. He stood a while looking at me. Then he came forward.

‘Becker,’ I said, ‘listen …’

He started a right lead, pulled it back and slammed a left to my mouth. We started in again. There wasn’t much defense. It was just punch, punch, punch. He pushed me over a chair and the chair flattened. I got up, caught him coming in. He stumbled backwards and I landed another right. He crashed backwards into the wall and the whole room shook. He bounced off and landed a right high on my forehead and I saw lights: green, yellow, red … Then he landed a left to the ribs and a right to the face. I swung and missed.

God damn, I thought, doesn’t anybody *hear* all this noise? Why don’t they come and stop it? Why don’t they call the police?

Becker rushed me again. I missed a roundhouse right and then that was it for me …

When I regained consciousness it was dark, it was night. I was under the bed, just my head was sticking out. I must have crawled under there. I was a coward. I had puked all over myself. I crawled out from under the bed.

I looked at the smashed dresser mirror and the chair. The table was upside down. I walked over and tried to set it upright. It fell over. Two of the legs wouldn't hold. I tried to fix them as best I could. I set the table up. It stood a moment, then fell over again. The rug was wet with wine and puke. I found a wine bottle lying on its side. There was a bit left. I drank that down and then looked around for more. There was nothing. There was nothing to drink. I put the chain on the door. I found a cigarette, lit it and stood in the window, staring down at Temple Street. It was a nice night out.

Then there was a knock on the door. 'Mr Chinaski?' It was Mrs Kansas. She wasn't alone. I heard other voices whispering. She was with her little dark friends.

'Mr Chinaski?'

'Yes?'

'I want to come into your room.'

'What for?'

'I want to change the sheets.'

'I'm sick now. I can't let you in.'

'I just want to change the sheets. I'll be just a few minutes.'

'No, I can't let you in. Come in the morning.'

I heard them whispering. Then I heard them walking down the hall. I went over and sat on the bed. I needed a drink, bad. It was a Saturday night, the whole town was drunk.

Maybe I could sneak out?

I walked to the door and opened it a crack, leaving the chain on, and I peeked out. At the top of the stairway there was a Filipino, one of Mrs Kansas' friends. He had a hammer in his hand. He was down on his knees. He looked up at me, grinned, and then pounded a nail into the rug. He was pretending to fix the rug. I closed the door.

I really needed a drink. I paced the floor. Why could everybody in the world have a drink but me? How long was I going to have to stay in that god-damned room? I opened the door again. It was the same. He looked up at me, grinned, then hammered another nail into the floor. I closed the door.

I got out my suitcase and began throwing my few clothes in there.

I still had quite a bit of money I had won gambling but I knew that I could never pay for the damages to that room. Nor did I want to. It really hadn't been my fault. They should have stopped the fight. And Becker had broken the mirror …

I was packed. I had the suitcase in one hand and my portable typewriter in its case in the other. I stood in front of the door for some time. I looked out again. He was still there. I slipped the chain off the door. Then I pulled the door open and burst out. I ran toward the stairway.

'HEY! *Where you go?*' the little guy asked. He was still down on one knee. He started to raise his hammer. I swung the portable typewriter hard against the side of his head. It made a horrible sound. I was down the steps and through the lobby and out the door.

Maybe I had killed the guy.

I started running down Temple Street. Then I saw a cab. He was empty. I leaped in.

'Bunker Hill,' I said, '*fast!*'

56

I saw a vacancy sign in the window in front of a rooming-house, had the cabby pull up. I paid him and walked up on the front porch, rang the bell. I had one black eye from the fight, another cut eye, a swollen nose, and my lips were puffed. My left ear was bright red and every time I touched it, an electric shock ran through my body.

An old man came to the door. He was in his undershirt and it looked like he had spilled chili and beans across the front of it. His hair was grey and uncombed, he needed a shave and he was puffing on a wet cigarette that stank.

'You the landlord?' I asked.

'Yep.'

'I need a room.'

'You workin'?'

'I'm a writer.'

'You don't look like a writer.'

'What do they look like?'

He didn't answer.

Then he said, '$2.50 a week.'

'Can I see it?'

He belched, then said, 'Foller me …'

We walked down a long hall. There was no hall rug. The boards creaked and sank as we walked on them. I heard a man's voice from one of the rooms.

'Suck me, you piece of shit!'

'Three dollars,' I heard a woman's voice.

'Three dollars? I'll give you a bloody asshole!'

He slapped her hard, she screamed. We walked on.

'The place is in back,' the guy said, 'but you are allowed to use the house bathroom.'

There was a shack in back with four doors. He walked up to #3 and opened it. We walked in. There was a cot, a blanket, a small dresser and a little stand. On the stand was a hotplate.

'You got a hotplate here,' he said.

‘That’s nice.’

‘$2.50 in advance.’

I paid him.

‘I’ll give you your receipt in the morning.’

‘Fine.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Chinaski.’

‘I’m Connors.’

He slipped a key off his key ring and gave it to me.

‘We run a nice quiet place here. I want to keep it that way.’

‘Sure.’

I closed the door behind him. There was a single light overhead, unshaded. Actually the place was fairly clean. Not bad. I got up, went outside and locked the door behind me, walked through the back yard to an alley.

I shouldn’t have given that guy my real name, I thought. I might have killed my little dark friend over on Temple Street.

There was a long wooden stairway which went down the side of a cliff and led to the street below. Quite romantic. I walked along until I saw a liquor store. I was going to get my drink. I bought two bottles of wine and I felt hungry too so I purchased a large bag of potato chips.

Back at my place, I undressed, climbed onto my cot, leaned against the wall, lit a cigarette and poured a wine. I felt good. It was quiet back there. I couldn’t hear anybody in any of the other rooms in my shack. I had to take a piss, so I put on my shorts, went around the back of the shack and let go. From up there I could see the lights of the city. Los Angeles was a good place, there were many poor people, it would be easy to get lost among them. I went back inside, climbed back on the cot. As long as a man had wine and cigarettes he could make it. I finished off my glass and poured another.

Maybe I could live by my wits. The eight-hour day was impossible, yet almost everybody submitted to it. And the war, everybody was talking about the war in Europe. I wasn’t interested in world history, only my own. What crap. Your parents controlled your growing-up period, they pissed all over you. Then when you got ready to go out on your own, the others wanted to stick you into a uniform so you could get your ass shot off.

The wine tasted great. I had another.

The war. Here I was a virgin. Could you imagine getting your ass blown off for the sake of history before you even knew what a woman was? Or owned an automobile? What would I be protecting? Somebody else. Somebody else who didn't give a shit about me. Dying in a war never stopped wars from happening.

I could make it. I could win drinking contests, I could gamble. Maybe I could pull a few holdups. I didn't ask much, just to be left alone.

I finished the first bottle of wine and started in on the second.

Halfway through the second bottle, I stopped, stretched out. My first night in my new place. It was all right. I slept.

I was awakened by the sound of a key in the door. Then the door pushed open. I sat up on the cot. A man started to step in.

'GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!' I screamed.

He left fast. I heard him running off.

I got up and slammed the door.

People did that. They rented a place, stopped paying rent and kept the key, sneaking back to sleep there if it was vacant or robbing the place if the occupant was out. Well, *he* wouldn't be back. He knew if he tried it again that I'd bust his sack.

I went back to my cot and had another drink.

I was a little nervous. I was going to have to pick up a knife.

I finished my drink, poured another, drank that and went back to sleep.

57

After English class one day Mrs Curtis asked me to stay.

She had great legs and a lisp and there was something about the legs and the lisp together that heated me up. She was about 32, had culture and style, but like everybody else, she was a god-damned liberal and that didn't take much originality or fight, it was just more Franky Roosevelt worship. I liked Franky because of his programs for the poor during the Depression. He had style too. I didn't think he really gave a damn about the poor but he was a great actor, great voice, and he had a great speech writer. But he wanted us in the war. It would put him into the history books. War presidents got more power and, later, more pages. Mrs Curtis was just a chip off old Franky only she had much better legs. Poor Franky didn't have any legs but he had a wonderful brain. In some other country he would have made a powerful dictator.

When the last student left I walked up to Mrs Curtis' desk. She smiled up at me. I had watched her legs for many hours and she knew it. She knew what I wanted, that she had nothing to teach me. She had only said one thing which I remembered. It wasn't her own idea, obviously, but I liked it: 'You can't overestimate the stupidity of the general public.'

'Mr Chinaski,' she looked up at me, 'we have certain students in this class who think they are very smart.'

'Yeh?'

'Mr Felton is our smartest student.'

'OK.'

'What is it that troubles you?'

'What?'

'There's something … troubling you.'

'Maybe.'

'This is your last semester, isn't it?'

'How did you know?'

I'd been giving those legs a goodbye look. I'd decided the campus was just a place to hide. There were some campus freaks who stayed on forever. The whole college scene was soft. They never told you what to expect out there in the real world. They just crammed you with theory and never told you how hard the pavements were. A college education could destroy an individual for life. Books could make you soft. When you put them down, and really went *out* there, then you needed to know what they never told you. I had decided to quit after that semester, hang around Stinky and the gang, maybe meet somebody who had guts enough to hold up a liquor store or better yet, a bank.

'I knew you were going to quit,' she said softly.

'"Begin" is a better word.'

'There's going to be a war. Did you read "Sailor Off The Bremen"?'

'That *New Yorker* stuff doesn't work for me.'

'You've got to read things like that if you want to understand what is happening today.'

'I don't think so.'

'You just rebel against *everything*. How are you going to survive?'

'I don't know. I'm already tired.'

Mrs Curtis looked down at her desk for a long time. Then she looked up at me.

'We're going to get drawn into the war, one way or the other. Are you going to go?'

'That doesn't matter. I might, I might not.'

'You'd make a good sailor.'

I smiled, thought about being a sailor, then discarded that idea.

'If you stay another term,' she said, 'you can have anything you want.'

She looked up at me and I knew exactly what she meant and she knew that I knew exactly what she meant.

'No,' I said, 'I'm leaving.'

I walked toward the door. I stopped there, turned, gave her a little nod goodbye, a slight and quick goodbye. Outside I walked along under the campus trees. Everywhere, it seemed, there was a boy and a girl together. Mrs Curtis was sitting alone at her desk as I walked alone. What a great triumph it would have been. Kissing that lisp, working those fine legs open, as Hitler swallowed up Europe and peered toward London.

After a while I walked over toward the gym. I was going to clean out my locker. No more exercising for me. People always talked about the good clean smell of fresh sweat. They had to make excuses for it. They never talked about the good clean smell of fresh shit. There was nothing really as glorious as a good beer shit – I mean after drinking twenty or twenty-five beers the night before. The odor of a beer shit like that spread all around and stayed for a good hour-and-a-half. It made you realize that you were really alive.

I found the locker, opened it and dumped my gym suit and shoes into the trash. Also two empty wine bottles. Good luck to the next one who got my locker. Maybe he'd end up mayor of Boise, Idaho. I threw the combo lock into the trash too. I'd never liked that combination: 1, 2, 1, 1, 2. Not very mental. The address of my parents' house had been 2122. Everything was minimal. In the ROTC it had been 1, 2, 3, 4; 1, 2, 3, 4. Maybe some day I'd move up to 5.

I walked out of the gym and took a shortcut through the playing field. There was a game of touch football going on, a pick-up game. I cut to one side to avoid it.

Then I heard Baldy: 'Hey, Hank!'

I looked up and he was sitting in the stands with Monty Ballard. There wasn't much to Ballard. The nice thing about him was that he never talked unless you asked him a question. I never asked him any questions. He just looked at life out from underneath his dirty yellow hair and yearned to be a biologist.

I waved to them and kept walking.

'Come on up here, Hank!' Baldy yelled. 'It's important.'

I walked over. 'What is it?'

'Sit down and watch that stocky guy in the gym suit.'

I sat down. There was only one guy in a gym suit. He had on track shoes with spikes. He was short but wide, very wide. He had amazing biceps, shoulders, a thick neck, heavy short legs. His hair was black; the front of his face almost flat; small mouth, not much nose, and the eyes, the eyes were there somewhere.

'Hey, I heard about this guy,' I said.

'Watch him,' said Baldy.

There were four guys on each team. The ball was snapped. The quarterback faded to pass. King Kong, Jr was on defense. He played about halfway back. One of the guys on the offensive team ran deep, the other ran short. The center blocked. King Kong, Jr lowered his shoulders and sped toward the guy playing short. He smashed into him, burying a shoulder into his side and gut and dumped him hard. Then he turned and trotted away. The pass was completed to the deep man for a TD.

'You see?' said Baldy.

'King Kong …'

'King Kong isn't playing football at all. He just hits some guy as hard as he can, play after play.'

'You can't hit a pass receiver before he catches the ball,' I said. 'It's against the rules.'

'Who's going to tell him?' Baldy asked.

'You going to tell him?' I asked Ballard.

'No,' said Ballard.

King Kong's team took the kick-off. Now he could block legally. He came down and savaged the littlest guy on the field. He knocked the guy completely over, his head went between his legs as he flipped. The little guy was slow getting up.

'That King Kong is a subnormal,' I said. 'How did he ever pass his entrance exam?'

'They don't have them here.'

King Kong's team lined up. Joe Stapen was the best guy on the other team. He wanted to be a shrink. He was tall, six foot two, lean, and he had guts. Joe Stapen and King Kong charged each other. Stapen did pretty good. He didn't get dumped. The next play they charged each other again. This time Joe bounced off and gave a little ground.

‘Shit,’ said Baldy, ‘Joe’s giving up.’

The next time Kong hit Joe even harder, spinning him around, then running him 5 or 6 yards back up the field, his shoulder buried in Joe’s back.

‘This is really disgusting! That guy’s nothing but a fucking *sadist!*’ I said.

‘Is he a sadist?’ Baldy asked Ballard.

‘He’s a fucking sadist,’ said Ballard.

The next play Kong shifted back to the smallest guy. He just ran over him and piled on top of him, dropping him hard. The little guy didn’t move for a while. Then he sat up and held his head. It looked like he was finished. I stood up.

‘Well, here I go,’ I said.

‘*Get* that son-of-a-bitch!’ said Baldy.

‘Sure,’ I said.

I walked down to the field.

‘Hey, fellas. Need a player?’

The little guy stood up, started to walk off the field. He stopped as he reached me.

‘Don’t go in there. All that guy wants is to kill somebody.’

‘It’s just touch football,’ I said.

It was our ball. I got into the huddle with Joe Stapen and the other two survivors.

‘What’s the game plan?’ I asked.

‘Just to stay the fuck alive,’ said Joe Stapen.

‘What’s the score?’

‘I think they’re winning,’ said Lenny Hill, the center.

We broke out of the huddle. Joe Stapen stood back and waited for the ball. I stood looking at Kong. I’d never seen him around campus. He probably hung around the men’s crapper in the gym. He looked like a shit-sniffer. He also looked like a fetus-eater.

‘Time!’ I called.

Lenny Hill straightened up over the ball. I looked at Kong.

'My name's Hank. Hank Chinaski. Journalism.'

Kong didn't answer. He just stared at me. He had dead white skin. There was no glitter or life in his eyes.

'What's your name?' I asked him.

He just kept staring.

'What's the matter? Got some placenta caught in your teeth?'

Kong slowly raised his right arm. Then he straightened it out and pointed a finger at me. Then he lowered his arm.

'Well, suck my weenie,' I said, 'what's *that* mean?'

'Come on, let's play ball,' one of Kong's mates said.

Lenny bent over the ball and snapped it. Kong came at me. I couldn't seem to focus on him. I saw the grandstand and some trees and part of the Chemistry Building shake as he crashed into me. He knocked me over backwards and then circled around me, flapping his arms like wings. I got up, feeling dizzy. First Becker KO's me, then this sadistic ape. He smelled; he stank; a real evil son-of-a-bitch.

Stapen had thrown an incomplete pass. We huddled.

'I got an idea,' I said.

'What's that?' asked Joe.

'I'll throw the ball. You block.'

'Let's leave it the way it is,' said Joe.

We broke out of the huddle. Lenny bent over the ball, snapped it back to Stapen. Kong came at me. I lowered a shoulder and rushed at him. He had too much strength. I bounced off him, straightened up, and as I did Kong came again, knifing his shoulder into my belly. I fell. I leaped up right away but I didn't feel like getting up. I was having breathing problems.

Stapen had thrown a short complete pass. Third down. No huddle. When the ball snapped Kong and I ran at each other. At the last moment I left my feet and hurled myself at him. The weight of my body hit his neck and his head, knocking him off balance. As he fell I kicked him as hard as I could and caught him right on the chin. We were both on the ground. I got up first. As Kong rose there was a red blotch on the side of his face and blood at the corner of his mouth. We trotted back to our positions.

Stapen had thrown an incomplete pass. Fourth down. Stapen dropped back to punt. Kong dropped back to protect his safety man. The safety man caught the punt and they came pounding up the field, Kong leading the way for his runner. I ran at them. Kong was expecting another high hurdle. This time I dove and clipped him at the ankles. He went down hard, his face hitting the ground. He was stunned, he stayed there, his arms spread out. I ran up and kneeled down. I grabbed him by the back of the neck, hard. I squeezed his neck and rammed my knee into his backbone and dug it in. 'Hey, Kong, buddy, are you all right?'

The others came running up. 'I think he's hurt,' I said. 'Come on, somebody help me get him off the field.'

Stapen got him on one side and I got Kong on the other and we walked him to the sideline. Near the sideline I pretended to stumble and ground my left shoe into his ankle.

'Oh,' said Kong, 'please leave me alone …'

'I'm just helpin' ya, buddy.'

When we got him to the sideline we dropped him. Kong sat and rubbed the blood from his mouth. Then he reached down and felt his ankle. It was skinned and would soon begin to swell. I bent over him. 'Hey, Kong, let's finish the game. We're behind 42–7 and need a chance to catch up.'

'Naw, I gotta make my next class.'

'I didn't know they taught dog-catching here.'

'It's *English Lit I*.'

'That figures. Well, look, I'll help you over to the gym and I'll put you under a hot shower, what you say?'

'No, you stay away from me.'

Kong got up. He was pretty busted. The great shoulders sagged, there was dirt and blood on his face. He limped a few steps. 'Hey, Quinn,' he said to one of his buddies, 'gimme a hand …'

Quinn took one of Kong's arms and they walked slowly across the field toward the gym.

‘Hey, Kong!’ I yelled, ‘I hope you make your class! Tell Bill Saroyan I said “hello”!’

The other fellows were standing around, including Baldy and Ballard who had come down from the stands. Here I had done my best ever god-damned act and not a pretty girl around for miles.

‘Anybody got a smoke?’ I asked.

‘I got some Chesterfields,’ Baldy said.

‘You still smoking pussy cigarettes?’ I asked.

‘I’ll take one,’ said Joe Stapen.

‘All right,’ I said, ‘since that’s all there is.’

We stood around, smoking.

‘We still have enough guys around to play a game,’ somebody said.

‘Fuck it,’ I said. ‘I hate sports.’

‘Well,’ said Stapen, ‘you sure took care of Kong.’

‘Yeah,’ said Baldy, ‘I watched the whole thing. There’s only one thing that confuses me.’

‘What’s that?’ asked Stapen.

‘I wonder which guy is the sadist?’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘I gotta go. There’s a Cagney movie showing tonight and I’m taking my cunt.’

I began to walk across the field.

‘You mean you’re taking your right hand to the movie?’ one of the guys yelled after me.

‘Both hands,’ I said over my shoulder.

I walked off the field, down past the Chemistry Building and then out on the front lawn. There they were, boys and girls with their books, sitting on benches, under the trees, or on the lawn. Green books, blue books, brown books. They were talking to each other, smiling, laughing at times. I cut over to the side of the campus where the ‘V’ car line ended. I boarded the ‘V,’ got my transfer, went to the back of the car, took the last seat in back, as always, and waited.

58

I made practice runs down to skid row to get ready for my future. I didn't like what I saw down there. Those men and women had no special daring or brilliance. They wanted what everybody else wanted. There were also some obvious mental cases down there who were allowed to walk the streets undisturbed. I had noticed that both in the very poor and very rich extremes of society the mad were often allowed to mingle freely. I knew that I wasn't entirely sane. I still knew, as I had as a child, that there was something strange about myself. I felt as if I were destined to be a murderer, a bank robber, a saint, a rapist, a monk, a hermit. I needed an isolated place to hide. Skid row was disgusting. The life of the sane, average man was dull, worse than death. There seemed to be no possible alternative. Education also seemed to be a trap. The little education I had allowed myself had made me more suspicious. What were doctors, lawyers, scientists? They were just men who allowed themselves to be deprived of their freedom to think and act as individuals. I went back to my shack and drank…

Sitting there drinking, I considered suicide, but I felt a strange fondness for my body, my life. Scarred as they were, they were mine. I would look into the dresser mirror and grin: if you're going to go, you might as well take eight, or ten or twenty of them with you…

It was a Saturday night in December. I was in my room and I drank much more than usual, lighting cigarette after cigarette, thinking of girls and the city and jobs, and of the years ahead. Looking ahead I liked very little of what I saw. I wasn't a misanthrope and I wasn't a misogynist but I liked being alone. It felt good to sit alone in a small space and smoke and drink. I had always been good company for myself.

Then I heard the radio in the next room. The guy had it on too loud. It was a sickening love song.

'Hey, buddy!' I hollered, 'turn that thing down!'

There was no response.

I walked to the wall and pounded on it.

'I SAID, "TURN THAT FUCKING THING DOWN!"'

The volume remained the same.

I walked outside to his door. I was in my shorts. I raised my leg and jammed my foot into the door. It burst open. There were two people on the cot, an old fat guy and an old fat woman. They were fucking. There was a small candle burning. The old guy was on top. He stopped and turned his head and looked. She looked up from underneath him. The place was very nicely fixed-up with curtains and a little rug.

'Oh, I'm sorry …'

I closed their door and went back to my place. I felt terrible. The poor had a right to fuck their way through their bad dreams. Sex and drink, and maybe love, was all they had.

I sat back down and poured a glass of wine. I left my door open. The moonlight came in with the sounds of the city: juke boxes, automobiles, curses, dogs barking, radios … We were all in it together. We were all in one big shit pot together. There was no escape. We were all going to be flushed away.

A small cat walked by, stopped at my door and looked in. The eyes were lit by the moon: pure red like fire. Such wonderful eyes.

'Come on, kitty …' I held my hand out as if there were food in it. 'Kitty, kitty …'

The cat walked on by.

I heard the radio in the next room shut off.

I finished my wine and went outside. I was in my shorts as before. I pulled them up and tucked in my parts. I stood before the other door. I had broken the lock. I could see the light from the candle inside. They had the door wedged closed with something, probably a chair.

I knocked quietly.

There was no answer.

I knocked again.

I heard something. Then the door opened.

The old fat guy stood there. His face was hung with great folds of sorrow. He was all eyebrows and mustache and two sad eyes.

'Listen,' I said, 'I'm very sorry for what I did. Won't you and your girl come over to my place for a drink?'

'No.'

'Or maybe I can bring you both something to drink?'

'No,' he said, 'please leave us alone.'

He closed the door.

I awakened with one of my worst hangovers. I usually slept until noon. This day I couldn't. I dressed and went to the bathroom in the main house and made my toilet. I came back out, went up the alley and then down the stairway, down the cliff and into the street below.

Sunday, the worst god-damned day of them all.

I walked over to Main Street, past the bars. The B-girls sat near the doorways, their skirts pulled high, swinging their legs, wearing high heels.

'Hey, honey, come on in!'

Main Street, East 5th, Bunker Hill. Shitholes of America.

There was no place to go. I walked into a Penny Arcade. I walked around looking at the games but had no desire to play any of them. Then I saw a Marine at a pinball machine. Both his hands gripped the sides of the machine, as he tried to guide the ball with body-English. I walked up and grabbed him by the back of his collar and his belt.

'Becker, I demand a god-damned rematch!'

I let go of him and he turned.

'No, nothing doing,' he said.

'Two out of three.'

'Balls,' he said, 'I'll buy you a drink.'

We walked out of the Penny Arcade and down Main Street. A B-girl hollered out from one of the bars, 'Hey, Marine, come on in!'

Becker stopped. 'I'm going in,' he said.

'Don't,' I said, 'they are human roaches.'

'I just got paid.'

‘The girls drink tea and they water your drinks. The prices are double and you never see the girl afterwards.’

‘I’m going in.’

Becker walked in. One of the best unpublished writers in America, dressed to kill and to die. I followed him. He walked up to one of the girls and spoke to her. She pulled her skirt up, swung her high heels and laughed. They walked over to a booth in a corner. The bartender came around the bar to take their order. The other girl at the bar looked at me.

‘Hey, honey, don’t you wanna play?’

‘Yeah, but only when it’s my game.’

‘You scared or queer?’

‘Both,’ I said, sitting at the far end of the bar.

There was a guy between us, his head on the bar. His wallet was gone. When he awakened and complained, he’d either be thrown out by the bartender or handed over to the police.

After serving Becker and the B-girl the bartender came back behind the bar and walked over to me.

‘Yeh?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Yeh? What ya want in here?’

‘I’m waiting for my friend,’ I nodded at the corner booth.

‘You sit here, you gotta drink.’

‘OK. Water.’

The bartender went off, came back, set down a glass of water.

‘Two bits.’

I paid him.

The girl at the bar said to the bartender, ‘He’s queer or scared.’

The bartender didn’t say anything. Then Becker waved to him and he went to take their order.

The girl looked at me. ‘How come you ain’t in uniform?’

‘I don’t like to dress like everybody else.’

‘Are there any other reasons?’

‘The other reasons are my own business.’

‘Fuck you,’ she said.

The bartender came back. ‘You need another drink.’

‘OK,’ I said, slipping another quarter toward him.

Outside, Becker and I walked down Main Street.

‘How’d it go?’ I asked.

‘There was a table charge, plus the two drinks. It came to $32.’

‘Christ, I could stay drunk for two weeks on that.’

‘She grabbed my dick under the table, she rubbed it.’

‘What did she say?’

‘Nothing. She just kept rubbing my dick.’

‘I’d rather rub my own dick and keep the thirty-two bucks.’

‘But she was so beautiful.’

‘God damn, man, I’m walking along in step with a perfect idiot.’

‘Someday I’m going to write all this down. I’ll be on the library shelves: BECKER. The “B’s” are very weak, they need help.’

‘You talk too much about writing,’ I said.

We found another bar near the bus depot. It wasn’t a hustle joint. There was just a barkeep and five or six travelers, all men. Becker and I sat down.

‘It’s on me,’ said Becker.

‘Eastside in the bottle.’

Becker ordered two. He looked at me.

‘Come on, be a man, join up. Be a Marine.’

‘I don’t get any thrill trying to be a man.’

‘Seems to me you’re always beating up on somebody.’

‘That’s just for entertainment.’

‘Join up. It’ll give you something to write about.’

‘Becker, there’s always something to write about.’

‘What are you gonna do, then?’

I pointed at my bottle, picked it up.

‘How are ya gonna make it?’ Becker asked.

‘Seems like I’ve heard that question all my life.’

‘Well, I don’t know about you but I’m going to try everything! War, women, travel, marriage, children, the works. The first car I own I’m going to take it completely apart! Then I’m going to put it back together again! I want to know about things, what makes them work! I'd like to be a correspondent in Washington, DC. I'd like to be where big things are happening.'

'Washington's crap, Becker.'

'And women? Marriage? Children?'

'Crap.'

'Yeah? Well, what do you want?'

'To hide.'

'You poor fuck. You need another beer.'

'All right.'

The beer arrived.

We sat quietly. I could sense that Becker was off on his own, thinking about being a Marine, about being a writer, about getting laid. He'd probably make a good writer. He was bursting with enthusiasms. He probably loved many things: the hawk in flight, the god-damned ocean, full moon, Balzac, bridges, stage plays, the Pulitzer Prize, the piano, the god-damned Bible.

There was a small radio in the bar. There was a popular song playing. Then in the middle of the song there was an interruption. The announcer said, 'A bulletin has just come in. The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor. I repeat: The Japanese have just bombed Pearl Harbor. All military personnel are requested to return immediately to their bases!'

We looked at each other, hardly able to understand what we'd just heard.

'Well,' said Becker quietly, 'that's it.'

'Finish your beer,' I told him.

Becker took a hit.

'Jesus, suppose some stupid son-of-a-bitch points a machine gun at me and pulls the trigger?'

'That could well happen.'

'Hank …'

'What?'

'Will you ride back to the base with me on the bus?'

'I can't do that.'

The bartender, a man about 45 with a watermelon gut and fuzzy eyes walked over to us. He looked at Becker. 'Well, Marine, it looks like you gotta go back to your base, huh?’

That pissed me. ‘Hey, fat boy, let him finish his drink, OK?’

‘Sure, sure … Want a drink on the house, Marine? How about a shot of good whiskey?’

‘No,’ said Becker, ‘it’s all right.’

‘Go ahead,’ I told Becker, ‘take the drink. He figures you’re going to die to save his bar.’

‘All right,’ said Becker, ‘I’ll take the drink.’

The barkeep looked at Becker.

‘You got a nasty friend …’

‘Just give him his drink,’ I said.

The other few customers were babbling wildly about Pearl Harbor. Before, they wouldn’t speak to each other. Now they were mobilized. The Tribe was in danger.

Becker got his drink. It was a double shot of whiskey. He drank it down.

‘I never told you this,’ he said, ‘but I’m an orphan.’

‘God damn,’ I said.

‘Will you at least come to the bus depot with me?’

‘Sure.’

We got up and walked toward the door.

The barkeep was rubbing his hands all over his apron. He had his apron all bunched up and was excitedly rubbing his hands on it.

‘Good luck, Marine!’ he hollered.

Becker walked out. I paused inside the door and looked back at the barkeep.

‘World War I, eh?’

‘Yeh, yeh …’ he said happily.

I caught up with Becker. We half-ran to the bus depot together. Servicemen in uniform were already beginning to arrive. The whole place had an air of excitement. A sailor ran past.

‘I’M GOING TO KILL ME A JAP!’ he screamed.

Becker stood in the ticket line. One of the servicemen had his girlfriend with him. The girl was talking, crying, holding onto him, kissing him. Poor Becker only had me. I stood to one side, waiting. It was a long wait. The same sailor who had screamed earlier came up to me. 'Hey, fellow, aren't you going to help us? What're you standing there for? Why don't you go down and sign up?'

There was whiskey on his breath. He had freckles and a very large nose.

'You're going to miss your bus,' I told him.

He went off toward the bus departure point.

'*Fuck the god-damned fucking Japs!*' he said.

Becker finally had his ticket. I walked him to his bus. He stood in another line.

'Any advice?' he asked.

'No.'

The line was filing slowly into the bus. The girl was weeping and talking rapidly and quietly to her soldier.

Becker was at the door. I punched him on the shoulder. 'You're the best I've known.'

'Thanks, Hank …'

'Goodbye …'

I walked out of there. Suddenly there was traffic on the street. People were driving badly, running stoplights, screaming at each other. I walked back over to Main Street. America was at war. I looked into my wallet: I had a dollar. I counted my change: 67¢.

I walked along Main Street. There wouldn't be much for the B-girls today. I walked along. Then I came to the Penny Arcade. There wasn't anybody in there. Just the owner standing in his high-perched booth. It was dark in that place and it stank of piss.

I walked along in the dark aisles among the broken machines. They called it a Penny Arcade but most of the games cost a nickel and some a dime. I stopped at the boxing machine, my favorite. Two little steel men stood in a glass cage with buttons on their chins. There were two hand grips, like pistol grips, with triggers, and when you squeezed the triggers the arms of your fighter would uppercut wildly. You could move your fighter back and forth and from side to side. When you hit the button on the chin of the other fighter he would go down hard on his back, KO’d. When I was a kid and Max Schmeling KO’d Joe Louis, I had run out into the street looking for my buddies, yelling ‘*Hey, Max Schmeling KO’d Joe Louis!*’ And nobody answered me, nobody said anything, they had just walked away with their heads down.

It took two to play the boxing game and I wasn’t going to play with the pervert who owned the place. Then I saw a little Mexican boy, eight or nine years old. He came walking down the aisle. A nice-looking, intelligent Mexican boy.

‘Hey, kid?’

‘Yes, Mister?’

‘Wanna play this boxing game with me?’

‘Free?’

‘Sure. I’m paying. Pick your fighter.’

He circled around, peering through the glass. He looked very serious. Then he said, ‘OK, I’ll take the guy in the red trunks. He looks best.’

‘All right.’

The kid got on his side of the game and stared through the glass. He looked at his fighter, then he looked up at me.

‘Mister, don’t you know that there’s a war on?’

‘Yes.’

We stood there.

‘You gotta put the coin in,’ said the kid.

‘What are you doing in this place?’ I asked him. ‘How come you’re not in school?’

‘It’s Sunday.’

I put the dime in. The kid started squeezing his triggers and I started squeezing mine. The kid had made a bad choice. The left arm of his fighter was broken and only reached up halfway. It could never hit the button on my fighter’s chin. All the kid had was a right hand. I decided to take my time. My guy had blue trunks. I moved him in and out, making sudden flurries.

The Mexican kid was great, he kept trying. He gave up on the left arm and just squeezed the trigger for the right arm. I rushed blue trunks in for the kill, squeezing both triggers. The kid kept pumping the right arm of red trunks. Suddenly blue trunks dropped. He went down hard, making a clanking sound.

'I got ya, Mister,' said the kid.

'You won,' I said.

The kid was excited. He kept looking at blue trunks flat on his ass.

'You wanna fight again, Mister?'

I paused, I don't know why.

'You out of money, Mister?'

'Oh, no.'

'OK, then, we'll fight.'

I put in another dime and blue trunks sprang to his feet. The kid started squeezing his one trigger and the right arm of red trunks pumped and pumped. I let blue trunks stand back for a while and contemplate. Then I nodded at the kid. I moved blue trunks in, both arms flailing. I felt I had to win. It seemed very important. I didn't know why it was important and I kept thinking, why do I think this is so important?

And another part of me answered, just because it is.

Then blue trunks dropped again, hard, making the same iron clanking sound. I looked at him laying on his back down there on his little green velvet mat.

Then I turned around and walked out.

About the Author

HAM ON RYE

Charles Bukowski was the legendary Californian writer who became famous for his semi-autobiographical books about lowlife America. Born in Germany in 1920 to an American soldier father and a German mother, he was brought to the United States at the age of three. He grew up in Los Angeles and lived there for the majority of his life. During his lifetime he published more than forty-five books of prose and poetry, all of which have been translated into over a dozen languages. Novels such as *Factotum, Ham on Rye* and *Post Office* made this one-time bum, and lifelong alcoholic, rich and famous, and culminated in the making of *Barfly*, a major Hollywood biopic. He died in 1994.

Praise for *Ham on Rye*

‘Raunchy yet lyrical, occasionally hilarious while abysmally sad – Charles Bukowski continues to smash away at the world and himself and for the first time one clearly sees the source of so much rage.’ *San Francisco Chronicle* ‘Based on his own horrific experiences, this great novel is Bukowski’s supremely honest account of a twisted childhood.’ Howard Sounes, author of *Bukowski: Locked in the Arms of a Crazy Life* ‘The Poet Laureate of Skid Row.’ *The Herald*

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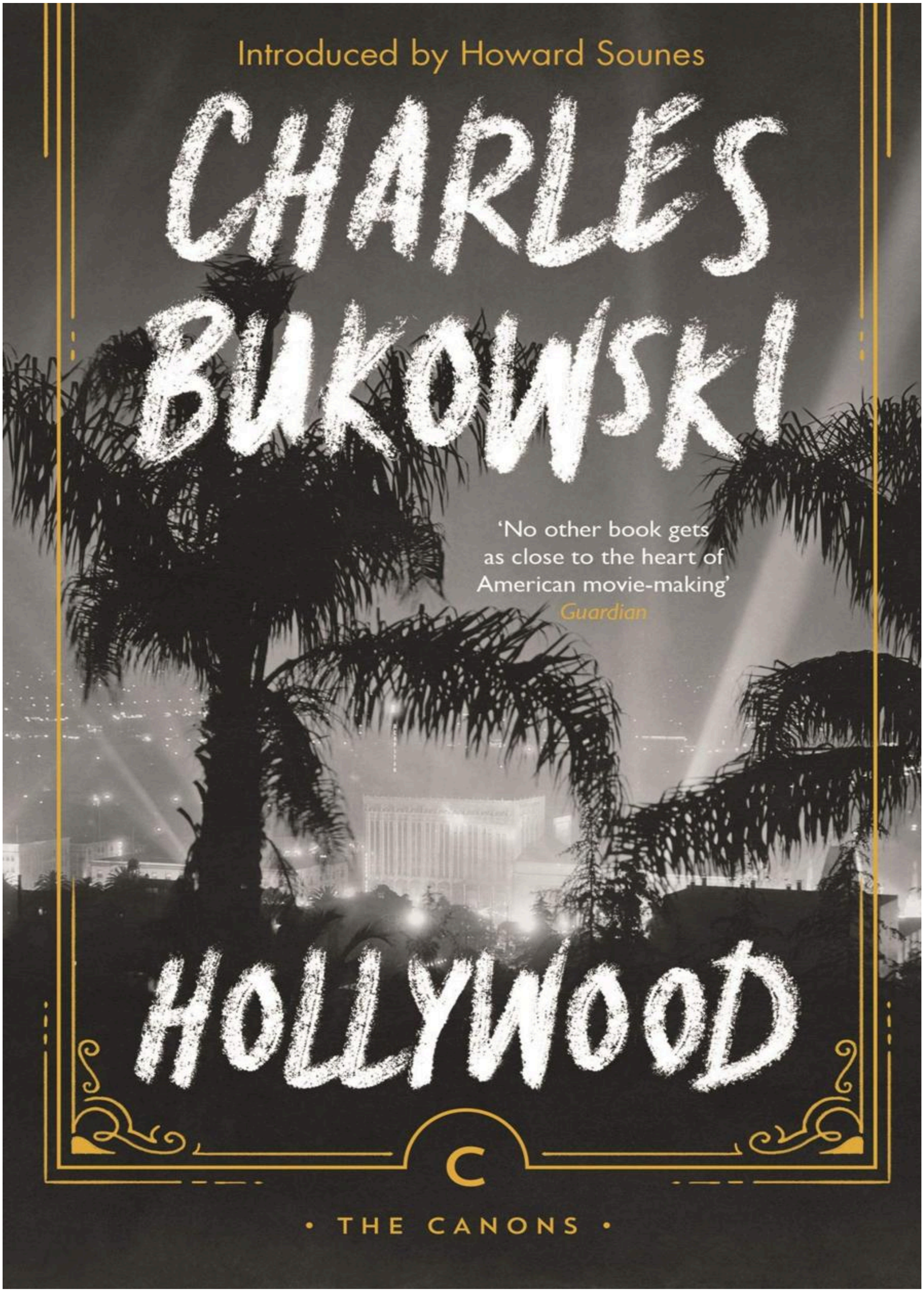

Introduced by Howard Sounes

CHARLES BUKOWSKI

'No other book gets as close to the heart of American movie-making'
Guardian

HOLLYWOOD

C

• THE CANONS •

Charles Bukowski

HOLLYWOOD

1989

for Barbet Schroeder

This is a work of fiction and any resemblance between the characters and persons living or dead is purely coincidental, etc.

1

A couple of days later Pinchot phoned. He said he wanted to go ahead with the screenplay. We should come down and see him?

So we got the directions and were in the Volks and heading for Marina del Rey. Strange territory.

Then we were down at the harbor, driving past the boats. Most of them were sailboats and people were fiddling about on deck. They were dressed in their special sailing clothes, caps, dark shades. Somehow, most of them had apparently escaped the daily grind of living. They had never been caught up in that grind and never would be. Such were the rewards of the Chosen in the land of the free. After a fashion, those people looked silly to me. And, of course, I wasn't even in their thoughts.

We turned right, down from the docks and went past streets laid out in alphabetical order, with fancy names. We found the street, turned left, found the number, pulled into the driveway. The sand came right up to us and the ocean was close enough to be seen and far enough away to be safe. The sand seemed cleaner than other sand and the water seemed bluer and the breeze seemed kinder.

"Look," I said to Sarah, "we have just landed upon the outpost of death. My soul is puking."

"Will you stop worrying about your soul?" Sarah responded.

No need to lock the Volks. I was the only one who could start it.

We were at the door. I knocked.

It opened to this tall slim delicate type, you smelled *artistry* all over him. You could see he had been born to Create, to Create grand things, totally unhindered, never bothered by such petty things as toothache, self-doubt, lousy luck. He was one of those who looked like a genius. I looked like a dishwasher so these types always pissed me just a bit.

"We're here to pick up the dirty laundry," I said.

"Ignore him," Sarah interspersed. "Pinchot suggested we come by."

"Ewe," said the gentleman, "do come in..."

We followed him and his little rabbit cheeks. He stopped then, at some special edge, he was charming, and he spoke over his left shoulder as if the entire world were listening to his delicate proclamation:

"I go get my VOD-KA now!"

He flashed off into the kitchen.

"Jon mentioned him the other night," said Sarah. "He is Paul Renoir. He writes operas and is also working in a form known as the Opera-Movie. Very avant-garde."

"He may be a great man but I don't want him sucking at my ear lobes."

"Oh, stop being so defensive! Everybody can't be like you!"

"I know. That's their problem."

"Your greatest strength," said Sarah, "is that you fear everything."

"I wish I had said that."

Paul walked back with his drink. It looked good. There was even a bit of lime in there and he stirred it with a little glass stick. A swizzle. Real class.

"Paul," I asked, "is there anything else to drink in there?"

"Ewe, sorry," he said, "please do help yourself!"

I charged into the kitchen right upon the heels of Sarah. There were bottles everywhere. While we were deciding, I cracked a beer.

"We better lay off the hard stuff," suggested my good lady. "You know how you get when you're drinking that."

"Right. Let's go with the wine."

I found a corkscrew and got a bottle of fine-looking red.

We each had a good hit. Then we refilled our glasses and walked out. At one time I used to refer to Sarah and me as Zelda and Scott, but that bothered her because she didn't like the way

Zelda had ended up. And I didn't like what Scott had typed. So, we had abandoned our sense of humor there.

Paul Renoir was at the large picture window checking out the Pacific.

"Jon is late," he said to the picture window and the ocean, "but he told me to tell you that he will be right along and to please stay."

"O.K., baby..."

Sarah and I sat down with our drinks. We faced the rabbit cheeks. He faced the sea. He appeared to be musing.

"Chinaski," he said, "I have read much of your work. It is wild shit. You are very good..."

"Thank you. But we know who is really the best. You're the best."

"Ewe," he said as he continued to face the sea, "it is very very nice of you to...realize that..."

The door opened and a young girl with long black hair walked in without knocking. Next thing we knew she was stretched out up on the back of the sofa, lengthwise, like a cat.

"I'm Popppy," she said, "with 4 p's."

I had a relapse: "We're Scott and Zelda."

"Cut the shit!" said Sarah.

I gave our proper names.

Paul turned from the sea.

"Popppy is one of the backers of your screenplay."

"I haven't written a word," I said.

"*You will...*"

"Would you, please?" I looked at Sarah and held up my empty glass.

Sarah was a good girl. She left with the glass. She knew that if I went in there I would start in on sundry bottles and then start in on my way to being nasty.

I would learn later that another name for Popppy was "The Princess from Brazil." And for starters she had kicked in ten grand. Not much. But it paid for some of the rent and some of the drinks.

The Princess looked at me from her cat-like position on the back of the couch.

"I've read your stuff. You're very funny."

"Thank you."

Then I looked over at Paul. "Hey, baby, did you hear that? I'm fanny!"

"You deserve," he said, "a certain place…"

He flashed toward the kitchen again as Sarah passed him with our refills. She sat down next to me and I had a hit.

The thought then occurred to me that I could just bluff the screenplay and sit around Marina del Rey for months sucking up drinks. Before I could really savor that thought, the door burst open and there was Jon Pinchot.

"Ah, you came by!"

"Ewe," I said.

"I think I have a backer! All you have to do is write it."

"It might take a few months."

"But, of course…"

Then Paul was back. He had a strange pink-looking drink for the Princess.

Pinchot flashed toward the kitchen for one of his own.

It was the first of many meetings which would simply dissolve into bouts of heavy drinking, especially on my part. I found it to be a needed build-up for my confidence as I was really only interested in the poem and the short story. Writing a screenplay seemed to me an ultimately stupid thing to do. But better men than I had been trapped into such a ridiculous act.

Jon Pinchot came out with his drink, sat down.

It became a long night. We talked and talked, about what I was not sure. Finally both Sarah and I had drunk too much to be able to drive back. We were kindly offered a bedroom.

It was in that bedroom, in the dark, as we poured a last good red wine, Sarah asked me, "You going to write a screenplay?"

"Hell no," I answered.

2

The next call from Jon Pinchot came 3 or 4 days later. He knew Danny Server, the young producer-director who had an entire movie studio down in Venice. Danny was going to lend us his screening room so we could see Pinchot's documentary, *The Laughing Beast*, about a black ruler who did it his way with bloody gusto. We were to meet first at Pinchot's for a few drinks. And so, it was back to Sailboat Lane again....

Jon answered the door and Sarah and I entered. Jon was not alone. A fellow stood there. He had a strange head of hair: it looked white and blond at the same time. The face was pink, going toward red. The eyes were a crazy round blue, very round, very blue. He had the look of a schoolboy about to play a horrible prank. That look, I would learn, never left him. He was likeable right off.

"This is François Racine," said Jon. "He acts in many of my films, and in others."

"And in the others, I get *paid*..." He bowed. "How do you do?"

Jon went for the drinks.

"Please pardon me," said François, "I will be finished in a moment."

On the table he had a little roulette wheel, electrically controlled, it was set off whirling with the push of a button. He had stacks of chips and a long sheet of paper full of calculations. There was also a betting board. He placed his chips, pushed the button, said, "It is my Lady with the Spinning Head. I am in love."

Jon came out with the drinks.

"When François is not actually gambling, he is usually practicing or at least thinking about it."

The wheel stopped and François raked in his reward.

"I have studied the permutations of the wheel and I have it," said François, "so no matter where it stops, I have guessed and I win."

"And his system works," said Jon, "but when he gets to the casinos he does not always stay with his system."

"I am often defeated by the Death Wish," François explained.

"Hank gambles," said Sarah. "He plays the horses. He's there every day they run."

François looked at me. "Ah, the horses! You win?"

"I like to think I do..."

"Ah, we go some day!"

"Sure."

François went back to his little wheel and we sat with our drinks.

"He has won and lost hundreds of thousands," Jon told us. "The only time he wants to be an actor is when he is dead broke."

"Makes sense," I said.

"By the way," said Jon, "I have talked to the producer Harold Pheasant and he is very interested in the screenplay. He is ready to back it as a movie."

"Harold Pheasant!" said Sarah. "I've heard of him. He's one of the biggest producers in the business."

"That's right," said Jon.

"But I haven't *written* a screenplay," I countered.

"No matter. He knows your writing. He's ready."

"It doesn't seem plausible."

"He often works that way and he makes nothing but money."

Jon went for the bottle.

"Maybe you *ought* to write a screenplay," Sarah suggested.

"Look what it did to F. Scott Fitzgerald."

"You're not Fitzgerald."

"No, he gave up drinking. That killed him."

François was still at his little roulette wheel. Jon came out with the bottle. "We'll have one more and then we should go."

"O.K.," I said.

“Listen, François, are you coming along?” Jon asked. “Oh no, please pardon me, I must do more research here....”

3

It was a nice screening room. Off to one side was a fairly large bar, with bartender. The screening room even came with a projectionist. Danny Server wasn't about.

There were 7 or 8 people at the bar. I didn't know who any of them were. I switched to vodka 7's and Sarah was drinking something purple or green or green-purple. Jon was off setting up the film with the projectionist.

There was a fellow down at the end of the bar, staring at me. He kept it up.

I finally looked at him.

"Just what do you do?" I asked.

He paused a moment, had a drink, looked back: "I blush to the very toes of my shoes to tell you this, but…I make films."

I was to find out he was Wenner Zergog, the noted German filmmaker. He was kind of crazy, off the end of the stick as they say, always taking insane chances with his own life and everybody else's.

"You ought to get into something worthwhile," I told him.

"I know," he answered, "but I don't know how to do anything else."

Then Jon was there.

"Come on, it's about to start…"

Sarah and I followed him into the screening room. Some of the others at the bar came along, including Wenner and his lady companion. We seated ourselves and Jon told us, "That was Wen-ner Zergog at the bar. Last week he and his wife had a pistol fight, they emptied their guns at each other, hitting nothing…"

"I hope his aim in his films is better…"

"Oh, it is."

The room darkened and *The Laughing Beast* spread across the screen.

Lido Mamin was a large man, in size and ambition, but his country was poor and small. With the big countries he played his cards both Left and Right, bargaining and counter-bargaining with both factions for money, food, weapons. But, actually, he wanted to rule the world. He was a bloody bastard with a marvelous sense of humor. He realized that, basically, all life was worthless, except his. Anybody the least suspect in his country was quickly murdered and dumped into the river. There were so many bodies floating in the river that the crocodiles became bloated and could eat no more.

Lido Mamin loved the camera. Pinchot had had Mamin stage a council meeting for the camera. His underlings sat before him trembling as Mamin asked questions, made statements of policy. He grinned continually, showing huge yellow teeth. When he wasn't killing somebody or ordering somebody killed, he was fucking. He had a dozen or more wives and more children than he could remember.

At times, during the council meeting, he stopped smiling, his face became the Will of God, he could do anything, and might. He could sense the fear of his cohorts and he delighted in and used that fear.

The council meeting ended without anybody getting murdered. " Then he called a meeting of all the doctors in the country. He assembled them at the main hospital, in the huge operating room, and they sat in the seats that circled above and Mamin stood down there in the center and spoke to them.

"You are doctors but you are nothing unless I tell you that you are something. You think you know certain things but this is an illusion. You are only trained in one small area. Let that training be useful to our country and not to yourselves. We live in a world where only the final survivors will be proven right. I will tell you how to use your surgical tools and your lives. Please do not be foolish and go against my wishes. I do not wish to waste your education and your skill. You must always remember that you know only what you have been taught. I know *more* than what is taught. You will always do as I suggest, I want to make this VERY CLEAR. Do you understand me?"

There was silence.

"Please," continued Mamin, "is there anybody who wishes to counter what I have just said?"

Further silence.

Mamin was a doll, a monstrous doll, and in a way you could like his gross and terrible style—as long as you didn't have to view the actual killings and torturings.

Next, for the camera, Lido Mamin showed off his Air Force. Only he didn't have an Air Force. Not yet. But he had the aviators and the uniforms.

"This," Lido Mamin said, "is our Air Force."

The first aviator came running down a long row of boards. He ran very swiftly. Then when he reached the end of the runway of boards he leaped into the air and flapped his arms. Then landed.

Then the next aviator came running along. Repeat.

Next aviator.

Next.

There must have been 14 or 15 aviators. As each one leaped he gave a little yell and upon each face there was laughter and elation. It was very strange after you got the feeling of it: for each was laughing at how ridiculous it was, yet each *believed*.

After the last take-off and landing, Mamin faced the camera.

"As foolish as this must look, it is very important. What we do not have in actuality, we are ready for in spirit. Someday we will have our Air Force. Meanwhile, we do not sulk in shadows of unbelief. Thank you very much."

Then there were some interior shots of the torture chambers. Nobody in them. But there was dung. Chains. Blood on the walls.

"This," said Lido Mamin, "is where the traitors and the liars finally tell the truth."

The final scene was of Mamin in a huge garden with many bodyguards, with all his wives and all his children. The children didn’t smile or jump about. They faced the camera silently as did the bodyguards. All the wives smiled, some of them holding babies. Lido Mamin smiled, showing his big yellow teeth. He looked very likeable, maybe even loveable.

The final shot was of the river of fat crocodiles. They just floated, vastly overweight and listless, eyes just rolling a bit as the bodies drifted by. Finis.

It was a fascinating documentary and I was happy to tell Pinchot as much.

“Yes,” he answered, “I like strange men. That is why I have come to find you.”

“I am very honored,” I said, “to be one with Lido Mamin.”

“It’s true,” he said, and then we left to go back to his place.

4

When we returned, François Racine was intent over his little spinning roulette wheel. He had evidently drunk a great deal of wine. His face was quite flushed and he had a large stack of chips in front of him. A huge ash was about to drop off the end of his cigar. It fell to the table.

"I have won one million, four hundred and fifty thousand dollars…"

The little ball stopped at a number. François raked in the chips: "That's enough…I mustn't be greedy."

We walked to the front room, sat down. Jon went for the wine and the glasses.

"What are you going to do with all the money you've won?" Sarah asked.

"I'm going to give it away. It's nothing. Life is for nothing. Money is nothing."

"Money is like sex," I said. "It seems much more important when you don't have any…"

"You talk like a writer," said François.

Jon was back. He opened the first bottle, poured drinks all around.

"You ought to come to Paris," he said to me, "you are well-regarded there. Your own country treats you like an outcast."

"Do they have a racetrack there?"

"Oh, yes!" said François.

"He hates to travel," said Sarah, "and they have racetracks here."

"Nothing like in Paris," said François. "You come to Paris. We'll go to the track together."

"Hell, I gotta write a screenplay."

"We'll play the horses and then we'll write."

"Let me think it over."

Jon lit a cigar. Then François found a new cigar and lit it. The cigars were long and round and made sizzling sounds at the lighted end.

"May the Lord save me," said Sarah.

"François and I went to Vegas the other night."

"How'd you make out?" asked Sarah.

François took a big swallow of his wine, inhaled on his cigar, blew out a vast, magic plume of smoke.

"Listen. Listen to this. I am five thousand dollars ahead, I am in control of the world, I hold Destiny in my hand like a cigarette lighter. I know Everything. I am Everything. There is no stopping me. The continents tremble. Then, Jon taps me on the shoulder. He says, 'Let's go see Tab Jones.' 'Who is this Tab Jones?' I ask. 'Never mind,' he says, 'let's go see him...' "

François emptied his wine glass. Jon refilled it.

"So we go into this other room. Here is this Tab Jones. He sings. His shirt is open and the black hairs on his chest show. The hairs are sweating. He wears a big silver cross in these sweating hairs. His mouth is a horrible hole cut into a pancake. He's got on tight pants and he's wearing a dildo. He grabs his balls and sings about all the good things he can do for women. He really sings badly, I mean, he is terrible. All about what he can do to women, but he's a fake, he really wants his tongue up some man's anus. I am to puke, listening to him. And we paid this good money too. And when you pay for a nightmare, you are *really* a fool! Who is this Tab Jones? They pay this fellow thousands for wearing a dildo and grabbing his balls and letting the lights shine on the cross. Good men starve in the streets and here is this ID-IOTE...being ADORED! The women are *screaming*! They think he is real! This *cardboard* man who sucks on shit in his dreams. 'Jon,' I say, 'please, let's leave, my mind is sliding away, I am offended and about to get sick in my lap!' 'Wait,' he says, 'maybe he'll get better.' He doesn't get better, he gets worse, he is louder, his shirt opens more, we see his bellybutton. A woman sitting next to me moans and reaches down into her panties. 'Madame,' I ask her, 'did you lose something?' The bellybutton, it's like a dead eye, it's dirty. Even a bird would be offended to leave his droppings there. Then this Tab Jones turns and shows us his behind. I can see behinds anytime, anywhere, and I don't even want to, and here we have to pay MONEY to see this fat, soft, ugly ass! You know, I've had bad times, I've been beaten by the police, for instance, for nothing. Well, almost for nothing. But looking at those dumb buttocks I felt worse than when the police were beating me for nothing. 'Jon,' I said, 'we must leave or my life is over!' " Jon smiled, "So we left. I just wanted to see Tab Jones." François was now actually in a fury. Little white flecks were forming at the corners of his mouth. Bits of spittle flew as he spoke. The end of his cigar was soaked darkly.

"Tab Jones! WHO IS THIS TAB JONES? What do *I* care for Tab Jones? Tab Jones is a fool! I am five thousand ahead and what do we do? We go see Tab Jones! Who is this Tab Jones? I know of no Tab Jones. My brother's name is not Tab Jones! Not even my mother's name! This Tab Jones is a fool!"

"So," said Jon, "we went back to the wheel."

"Yes," said François, "I am five thousand ahead and we have seen the dead dildo sing. My concentration is broken. Who is this Tab Jones? I've seen better men picking up seagull dung! Where am I? The wheel spins and it is a stranger! I am like a baby dumped into a barrel of tarantulas! What are these numbers? What are these colors? The little white ball leaps and buries itself in my heart, eating from the inside out. I have no chance. My concentration is broken! Dildoes parade as the idiots scream for more! I am dizzied. I leap in with a rush of chips. I see my skull already in the stupid casket. Who is this Tab Jones? I lose. I don't know where I am. Once the concentration is broken, once you begin to fall, there is no return. Knowing I had no chance, I played all the chips away. I made all the wrong moves as if an enemy had taken over my body and my mind. I was finished. And why? BECAUSE WE HAD TO GO SEE TAB JONES? I ask you, WHO IS THIS FUCKING

TAB JONES?” François was finished, exhausted. His cigar fell out of his mouth.

Sarah picked it up and put it in an ashtray. François immediately found a new cigar in his shirt pocket, slid it out of its silver tube, did the licking and the priming, rolled it, stuck it into his mouth, gathered himself and lit it with a fine flourish. He reached for the bottle, poured drinks all about, straightened up, smiled: “Shit, I probably would have lost anyhow. A gambler without an excuse is a gambler who can’t continue.”

“You talk like a writer,” I said.

“If I could write like one, I’d write that screenplay for you.”

“Thank you.”

“What’s he paying you?”

I made a motion through the air with my hand: nebulous answer.

“I will write it for you and we will split it in half, all right?”

“All right.”

“No,” said Jon, “I will be able to tell the difference.”

“All right, then,” said François, “Tab Jones will write it with his dildo.”

We all agreed on that, lifted our glasses in a toast. It was the beginning of a good night.

5

I was leaning against the bar in Musso's. Sarah had gone to the lady's room. I liked the bar at Musso's, bar just as bar, but I didn't like the room it was in. It was known as the "New Room." The "Old Room" was on the other side and I preferred to eat there. It was darker and quieter. In the old days I used to go to the Old Room to eat but I never actually ate. I just looked at the menu and told them, "Not yet," and kept ordering drinks. Some of the ladies I brought there were of ill-repute and as we drank on and on, often loud arguments began, replete with cursing and spilling of drinks, calls for more to drink. I usually gave the ladies cab fare and told them to get the hell out and I went on drinking alone. I doubt they ever used the cab fare for cab fare. But one of the nicest things about Musso's was that when I returned again, after fucking up, I was always greeted with warm smiles. So strange.

Anyhow, I was leaning against the bar and the New Room was full, mostly with tourists, they were chatting and they were twisting their necks and they were giving off rays of death. I ordered a new drink and then there was a tap on my shoulder.

"Chinaski, how are you?"

I turned and looked. I never knew who anybody was. I could meet you the night before and not remember you the next day. If they dug my mother out of her grave I wouldn't know who she was.

"I'm all right," I said. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"No, thanks. We haven't met. I'm Harold Pheasant."

"Oh yeah. Jon told me you were thinking of…"

"Yes, I want to finance your screenplay. I've read your work. You've got a marvelous sense of dialogue. I've read your work: very filmatic!"

"Sure you won't have a drink?"

“No, I have to get back to my table.”

“Yeah. What ya been doing lately, Pheasant?”

“Just finished producing a film about the life of Mack Derouac.”

“Yeah? What’s it called?”

“*The Heart’s Song*.”

I took a drink.

“Hey, wait a minute! You’re jokingl You’re not going to call it *The Heart’s Song*?”

“Oh yes, that’s what it’s going to be called.”

He was smiling.

“You can’t fool me, Pheasant. You’re a real joker! *The Heart’s Song*! Jesus Christ!”

“No,” he said, “I’m serious.”

He suddenly turned and walked off…

Just then Sarah came back. She looked at me.

“What are you grinning about?”

“Let me order you a drink and I’ll tell you.”

I got the barkeep over and also ordered another for myself.

“Guess who I saw in the Old Room,” she said.

“Who?”

“Jonathan Winters.”

“Yeah. Guess who I talked to while you were gone.”

“One of your x-sluts.”

“No, no. Worse.”

“There’s nothing worse than those.”

“I talked to Harold Pheasant.”

“The producer?”

“Yes, he’s over at that corner table.”

“Oh, I see!”

“No, *don’t* look. Don’t wave. Drink your drink. I’ll drink mine.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?”

“You see, he was the producer who was going to produce the screenplay that I haven’t written.”

“I know.”

“While you were gone he came over to talk to me.”

“You already said.”

“He didn’t even want a drink.”

“So you screwed it up and you’re not even drunk.”

“Wait. He wanted to talk about a movie he had just produced.”

“How’d you screw it up?”

“I didn’t screw it up. *He* screwed it up.”

“Sure. Tell me.”

I looked in the mirror. I liked myself but I didn’t like myself in the mirror. I didn’t look like that. I finished my drink.

“Finish your drink,” I said.

She did.

“Tell me.”

“That’s twice you’ve said, ‘Tell me.’ “

“Remarkable memory and you’re not even drunk yet.”

I motioned the barkeep in, ordered again.

“Well, Pheasant came over and he told me about this movie he produced. It’s about a writer who couldn’t write but who got famous because he looked like a rodeo rider.”

“Who?”

“Mack Derouac.”

“And that upset you?”

“No, that didn’t matter. It was fine until he told me the title of the movie.”

“Which was?”

“Please. I am trying to drive it out of my mind. It’s utterly stupid.”

“Tell me.”

“All right…”

The mirror was still there.

“Tell me, tell me, tell me…”

“All right: *The Furry Flotsam Flies*.”

“I like that.”

“I didn’t. I told him so. He walked off. We lost our only backer.”

“You ought to go over there and apologize.”

“No way. Horrendous title.”

"You just wanted his movie to be about *you*."

"*That's* it! I'll write a screenplay about myself!"

"Got the title?"

"Yeah: *Flies In the Furry Flotsam*."

"Let's get out of here."

With that, we did.

6

We were to meet Jon Pinchot in the lobby of the Beverly Hills Cheshire at 2 p.m. It meant missing a day at the track, which did bother me, but Jon had insisted. There was a fellow there who had the ability to raise money, to back films. This fellow, Jean-Paul Sanrah, had no money himself but it didn't matter: they said he could jack off a statue in the park and money would emanate from the genitals. Great. Suite #530. Sounded more like quitting time.

Also, lounging around Suite #530 was Jon-Luc Modard, the French film director. Pinchot said he more than liked what I wrote. Great.

Dear Sarah was along in case I needed help getting back home. Besides, she believed there might be starlets in #530 flashing their navels.

We got there and Jon was in the lobby sitting in a big leather chair, looking for freaks and madmen. He saw us, then rose, puffing out his chest. Jon was a big fellow but he always liked to appear larger than he was.

We exchanged words of greeting and followed Jon Pinchot to the elevator.

"How's the screenplay coming?"

"It's jelling."

"What's it about?"

"A drunk. Lots of drunks."

The elevator door opened. It was nice in there. Padded green, dark fluffed green material and if you looked into the green you could see peacocks there, many many peacocks. They were in the ceiling too.

"Class," I said.

"Too much," said Sarah.

It stopped at 5 and we moved out. The rug was made of more fluffed green with more peacocks. We were walking on peacocks. Then we were at #530. It was a large heavy black door, much larger than ordinary doors, maybe twice as large. It looked more like the gate beyond the moat.

Jon rapped with an iron knocker shaped into the head of Balzac.

Nothing.

He knocked again. Louder.

We waited.

Then the door slowly opened. A little man almost as white as a sheet of paper opened the door.

"Henri-Leon!" said Jon Pinchot.

"Jon!" said Henry-Leon. Then, "Do, all of you, please come in!"

We walked in. It was spacious. And everything was oversize. Large chairs, large tables. Long walls. High ceilings. But there was a strange musty smell. For all the vastness there was the feeling of a tomb.

We were introduced about.

The fellow as white as a sheet of paper was Henri-Leon Sanrah, the brother of Jean-Paul Sanrah, the money-getter. And there was Jon-Luc Modard. He stood very still, said nothing. You got the idea that he was posing, being a genius. He was small, dark, looked like he had shaved badly with a cheap electric razor.

"Ah," Henri-Leon Sanrah said to me, "you brought your daughter! I've heard about your daughter, Reena!"

"No, no," I said, "this is Sarah. She's my wife."

"There are drinks on the table. Many wines. And food. Please help yourself. I'll go get Jean-Paul," said Henri.

With that Henri-Leon offed to the other room to find Jean-Paul. And with that, Jon-Luc Modard turned and walked to a dark corner, placed himself there and watched us. We went to the table.

"Open the red," I said to Pinchot. "Open several reds."

Pinchot began working the wine opener. There was food everywhere on silver platters.

"Don't eat the meat," said Sarah. "Or the cakes: too much sugar."

The gods had sent Sarah to add ten years to my life. The gods kept driving me toward the blade, then, at the last moment, lifting my head off the block. Very strange, those gods. Now they were driving me to write a screenplay. I had no appetite for that. Of course, I knew if I wrote it it would be a good one. Not a great one. But a good one. I was hot with words.

Pinchot poured the wine. We all lifted our glasses.

"Umm Hummm," said Sarah.

"French," said Pinchot.

"I forgive you," I said.

As we drank, I was able to see into the other room. The door, as they say, was ajar. And Henri-Leon was trying to rouse a large body resting on this large bed. The body would not rouse.

I saw Henri-Leon reach into a bowl and grab a handful of icecubes. Two hands full. He pressed the icecubes against both sides of the face and on the forehead. He opened the shirt and rubbed the ice on the chest.

The body still didn't rouse.

Then all at once it sat up, screamed: "YOU SON OF A BITCH, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE? I'M GOING TO HAVE TO DEFROST MYSELF!"

"Jean-Paul, Jean-Paul...you have...visitors..."

"VISITORS? VISITORS? I NEED VISITORS LIKE A DOG NEEDS FLEAS! GO OUT THERE AND STUFF FROGS IN THEIR MOUTHS! PISS ON THEM! BURN THEM!"

"Jean-Paul, Jean-Paul. . . you had an appointment. . . with Jon Pinchot and his screenwriter..."

"All right...shit...I'll be right out...I'm going to jack-off first. . . No, no, I'll wait...something to look forward to..."

Henri-Leon came out and spoke to us.

"He'll be right out. He's been under terrific pressure. He thought his wife was leaving him. Early today, a cablegram from Paris: now she has changed her mind. It was a mortal blow, like great oxen being ripped apart by a pack of mad dogs…”

We didn’t know what to say.

Then Jean-Paul came trundling out. He was dressed in white pants with wide yellow stripes. Pink stockings. No shoes. His hair was all in brown curls, didn’t need combing. But the brown hair looked bad. Like it was dying and couldn’t make up its mind what color to be. He was undershirted and scratching. He kept scratching. Unlike his brother, he was big, and pink…no, red, a red that flamed and faded, faded away one moment to his brother’s white, then flamed, redder than ever.

The introductions went around.

“Ah, ah, ah,” he said.

Then, “Where’s Modard?”

Then, he looked around, saw Modard in the corner.

“Hiding again, huh? God damn, I wish he’d do something new.”

Suddenly Jean-Paul turned and ran back into the bedroom, slamming the door.

Modard let out a little cough from his corner and we poured some more wine. It was all really excellent. Life was good. All you had to do in their little world was be a writer or an artist or a ballet dancer and you could just sit or stand around, inhaling and exhaling, drinking wine, pretending you knew what the hell.

Then Jean-Paul came crashing back through the door. I thought he’d hurt his shoulder. He stopped, felt his shoulder, dismissed it, scratched himself and charged forward again. He began circling the table at a quick and even pace, shouting:

“WE’VE ALL GOT ASSHOLES, RIGHT? IS THERE ANYBODY IN THIS ROOM WITHOUT AN ASSHOLE? IF SO, SPEAK UP AT ONCE, AT ONCE, YOU HEAR ME?”

Jon Pinchot dug his elbow into my side: “See, he’s a genius, see?”

Jean-Paul circled at the same quick pace, screaming: "WE'VE ALL GOT THIS SLICE IN THE BACK, RIGHT? DOWN THERE, ABOUT IN THE MIDDLE, RIGHT? THE SHIT POURS OUT OF THERE, RIGHT? OR AT LEAST WE HOPE IT DOES! TAKE AWAY OUR SHIT AND WE ARE DEAD! THINK HOW MUCH SHIT WE SHIT IN A LIFETIME! THE EARTH, AT THE MOMENT, ABSORBS IT! BUT THE SEAS AND THE RIVERS ARE GAGGING UP THEIR VERY LIVES WHILE SWALLOWING OUR SHIT! WE ARE FILTHY, FILTHY, FILTHY! I HATE US ALL! EVERY TIME I WIPE MY ASS, I HATE US ALL!"

Then, he stopped, seemed to see Pinchot.

"You want money, right?"

Pinchot smiled.

"Fucker, I will get you your god damned money," said Jean-Paul.

"Thank you. I just told Chinaski, here, that you were a genius."

"Shut up!"

Then Jean-Paul looked at me.

"The best thing about your writing is that it excites the Institutionalized. Also those that should be excited. And that figure goes into the many millions. If you can only remain pure in your stupidity, someday you may get a phone call from hell."

"Jean-Paul, I've already gotten those."

"Yeah? Huh? Who?"

"X-girl friends."

"YOU DULL ME!" he screamed and began circling the table again, scratching himself as he did so.

Then, after one last big circle, he ran to the bedroom, slammed the door and was gone.

"My brother," said Henri-Leon, "is not feeling well today. He is upset."

I reached around and refilled the glasses.

Pinchot leaned toward me and whispered, "This suite, they've been here for days, eating and drinking, they don't have to pay the bill…"

"Really?"

"It's paid for by Frances Ford Lopalla. He thinks Jean-Paul is a genius..."

"Love and Genius are two of the most over-used words in the language," I said.

"You're starting to talk silly now," Sarah told me, "you're starting to get stinko."

With that, Jon-Luc Modard emerged from his corner. He walked up to us.

"Give me a fucking wine," he said.

I poured it tall. Jon-Luc drank it right down. I poured another.

"I've read your shit," he said. "Best thing about it, it's so simple. You have a case of brain-damage, no?"

"I might. I lost almost all the blood in my body in 1957. I was in the basement of a charity ward for 2 days before some crazy intern with a conscience found me. I think maybe I lost a lot of things then, more mental than physical."

"It is one of his favorite stories," said Sarah. "I love him, but you have no idea how many times I've had to listen to that story."

"I love you too, Sarah," I said, "but somehow, the telling of old stories, again and again, seems to bring them closer to what they were supposed to be."

"O.K., Popsy, I'm sorry," Sarah said.

"Listen," said Jon-Luc, "what I want to ask you to do is to write the English dialogue for the sub-titles of my new movie. Also, I have a scene I want to use from one of your stories, where the man gets a blow job under the desk and just goes about his business, answering the telephone and all that crap. Is it a deal?"

"It's a deal," I said.

Then we just pulled up the chairs and started drinking. And Jon-Luc started talking. He talked and he talked, looking only at me. At first, I felt flattered, then after a while, I felt less than that.

Jon-Luc kept right on talking. He was being dark and playing Genius. Maybe he was a Genius. I didn't want to get bitter about it. But I had had Genius pushed at me all through school: Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Ibsen, G.B. Shaw, Chekov, all those dullards. And worse, Mark Twain, Hawthorne, the Bronte sisters, Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, it all just laid on you like a slab of cement, and you wanted to get out and away, they were like heavy stupid parents insisting upon regulations and ways that would make even the dead cringe.

Jon-Luc just kept right on talking. That's all I remember. Except now and then, my good Sarah saying, "Hank, you shouldn't drink so much. Slow down a little. I don't want you dead in the morning."

But Jon-Luc was on a roll.

I no longer understood what he was saying. I saw lips moving. He was not unpleasant, he was just there. He needed a shave. And we were in this strange Beverly Hills hotel where you walked on peacocks. A magic world. I liked it because I hadn't seen anything like it before. It was senseless and perfect and safe.

The wine poured and Jon-Luc kept going.

I lapsed into my pathetic cut-off period. Often with humans, both good and bad, my senses simply shut off, they get tired, I give up. I am polite. I nod. I pretend to understand because I don't want anybody to be hurt. That is the one weakness that has lead me into the most trouble. Trying to be kind to others I often get my soul shredded into a kind of spiritual pasta.

No matter. My brain shuts off. I listen. I respond. And they are too dumb to know that I am not there.

The drinks poured and Jon-Luc kept on talking. I'm sure that he said many astonishing things. I simply focused on his eyebrows...

The next morning in my own place, in Sarah's and my bed, the phone rang about 11 a.m.

"Hello?"

It was Pinchot.

"Listen, I have to tell you something!"

"Yes?"

"Modard NEVER TALKS. There has been NOBODY, NOBODY WHO HAS EVER CAUSED HIM TO TALK LIKE YOU DID! HE TALKED FOR HOURS! EVERYBODY WAS ASTONISHED!"

"Oh, O.K."

"YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND! HE NEVER TALKS! HE TALKED TO YOU FOR HOURS!"

"Listen, Jon, I'm sorry but I'm sick, I have to sleep."

"All right. But I must tell you one more thing."

"Shoot."

"It's about Jean-Paul Sanrah."

"Yes?"

"He says that I must suffer, that I haven't suffered enough and that when I have suffered more he will get me the money."

"All right."

"He's strange, isn't he? A real genius."

"Yes," I answered, "I think that he is."

I hung it up.

Sarah was still asleep. I turned on my right side, toward the window, because sometimes I snored and I wanted to direct the sound away from her.

I had just fallen into that gentle dark, that last rest given to us before death, when Sarah's favorite cat, Beauty, stepped off her own special pillow by Sarah's head and walked across my face. One clawed foot tore into my left ear, then she jumped to the floor, walked across, and leaped up onto the sill of the open window facing east. As the bloody sun moved up I was not gripped by entrancing thoughts.

7

That night, sitting at the typer, I poured two drinks, I drank two drinks, I smoked 3 cigarettes and listened to Brahms' Third on the radio, and then I realized that I needed something to help me get into the screenplay. I punched Pinchot's number. He was in.

"Allo?"

"Jon, it's Hank."

"Hank, how are you?"

"Fine. Listen, I'll take the ten."

"But you said it might hinder your creative process to take it in advance."

"I've changed my mind. There hasn't been a creative process."

"You mean…?"

"I mean, I've worked it out in my mind but there is nothing yet on paper."

"What do you have in mind?"

"It's about a drunk. He just sits on this barstool night and day."

"Do you think the people would care about such a man?"

"Listen, Jon, if I worried about what the people cared about I'd never write anything."

"All right. Should I bring the check over to you?"

"No. Just put it in the mail. Tonight. Thank you."

"Thank you," said Jon.

I walked over to the typewriter and sat down. It worked right away. I typed:

THE DRUNK WITH THE BLUE AND YELLOW SOUL

EXTERIOR/INTERIOR—DANDY'S BAR—DAY

The CAMERA PANS DOWN FROM ABOVE; IT MOVES SLOWLY through the bar entrance and INTO THE INTERIOR BAR.

A YOUNG MAN sits on a barstool as if he had been there for eternity. He lifts his glass…

I was into it. All you needed was the first line, then everything followed. It was always there, it only needed something to set it running.

That bar came back to me. I remembered how you could smell the urinal from wherever you sat. You needed a drink right off to counteract that. And before you went back to that urinal you needed 4 or 5. And the people of that bar, their bodies and faces and voices came back to me. I was there again. I saw the draft beer again in that thin glass flared at the top, the white foam looking at you, bubbling just a bit. The beer was green and after the first gulp, about a fourth of the glass, you inhaled, held your breath, and you were started. The morning bartender was a good man. The dialogue came and took care of itself. I typed on and on...

Then, the phone rang. It was long distance. It was my agent and translator from Germany, Karl Vossner. Karl loved to talk the way he thought hip Americans talked.

"Hey, motherfucker, how ya doin'?"

"All right, Karl, you still riding your joystick?"

"Yeah, my ceiling is riddled with flakes of dry sperm."

"Good man."

"Thanks, baby. I learn all the good things from you. But, baby, I got good news. You wanna hear, motherfucker?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah, baby!"

"Well, besides whistling 'Dixie' out of my asshole, I've translated 3 of your books: poems, *The Lice of Doom*; short stories, *Cesspool Dreams*; and your novel, *Central Station Arson*."

"I owe you my left ball, Karl."

"O.K., send it airmail. But, baby, there's more..."

"Tell me, tell me..."

"Well, we had a book fair here last month and I met with the 6 biggest publishers in Germany and let me tell you, they are hot for your body!"

"My body?"

"Your body of work, you know. Dig?"

"I dig, baby."

“I got these 6 big publishers in a hotel room, I laid out the beer and the wine and the cheese and the nuts. Then I told them it would be open bidding for the advance on the 3 books. They just laughed and got into the booze. I had those assholes playing right into our hand. You are a hot number and they know it. I told a few jokes to get them loose, then the bidding started. Well, to get to the short-hairs, Krumph made the largest bid. I had the motherfucker sign a contract. Then we all hung one on together. All us assholes got stinko, Krumph especially. So, we scored. We’re in like Flynn!”

“You’re one cool dude, Karl. What’s my cut?”

“Baby, it should amount to around 35 grand. I’ll wire it to you within a week.”

“Man oh man, that’s really *rowdy*!”

“It beats blowing glass, motherfucker.”

“And how, baby. Hey, Karl, ever heard this one? What’s the difference between a chicken’s asshole and a rabbit’s asshole?”

“‘No, what’s the difference?”

“Ask little Dick.”

“I got it! Far out!”

With that, our conversation was over.

Within an hour I was 45 thousand dollars richer. 30 years of starvation and rejection were starting to kick in.

I walked back to the typer, poured a good tall drink, belted that, poured another. I found 3/4’s of a stale cigar, lit it. Shostakovich’s Fifth was on the radio. I hit the typer:

The Bartender, Luke, leans forward over bar, eyeing the young man.

LUKE

Listen, you’re in this place night and day. All you do is sit and suck up the booze.

YOUNG MAN

Yep.

LUKE

O.K., look, I don’t mean to hurt your feelings or nothing but like maybe this shit don’t lead nowhere.

YOUNG MAN

That’s all right, Luke, don’t worry about me. Just keep them coming.

LUKE

Sure, kid. But ain’t there another part of you somewhere?

YOUNG MAN

Hey, Luke, you ever heard this one? What's the difference between a chicken's asshole and a rabbit's asshole?

LUKE

I don’t want to hear no jokes, man. I want to know: Isn’t there another part of you somewhere?

YOUNG MAN

Well, shit. I was in the 6th grade, I think. The teacher asked us to write something about our most moving experience. And I don’t mean like moving to Denver.

LUKE

Yeah.

YOUNG MAN

Anyhow, I wrote about this frog I found in the garden. He had one of his legs caught in a wire fence. He couldn't get away. I got his leg out of the wire fence but he still wouldn't move.

LUKE

(yawning)

Yeah?

YOUNG MAN

So I held him in my lap and talked to him. I told him that I was trapped, that my life was caught in something too. I talked to him for a long time. At last he hopped out of my lap and hopped across the lawn and vanished into some brush. And I said to myself that he was the first thing that I had ever missed in my life.

LUKE

Yeah?

YOUNG MAN

The teacher read it to the class. Everybody cried.

LUKE

Yeah. So?

YOUNG MAN

Well, I thought that someday I might be a writer.

LUKE

(leaning forward)

Kid, you’re nuts!

I decided that was enough screenplay writing for one night. I just sat by the typer and listened to the music on the radio. I didn’t remember going to bed. But in the morning, I was there.

8

Vin Marbad came highly recommended by Michael Huntington, my official photographer. Michael snapped me constantly, but so far there had been no large call for these efforts.

Marbad was a tax consultant. He arrived one night with his briefcase, a dark little man. I had been drinking quietly for some hours, sitting with Sarah while watching a movie on my old black-and-white TV.

He knocked with a rapid dignity and I let him in, introduced him to Sarah, poured him a wine.

“Thank you,” he said, taking a sip. “You know, that here in America, if you don’t spend money they are going to take it away.”

“Yeah? What you want me to do?”

“Put a payment down on a house.”

“Huh?”

“Mortgage payments are tax deductible.”

“Yeah, what else?”

“Buy a car. Tax deductible.”

“All of it?”

“No, just some. Let me handle that. What we have to do is build you some tax shelters. Look here—”

Vin Marbad opened his briefcase and slipped out many sheets of paper. He stood up and came toward me with the papers.

“Real estate. Here, I’ve bought some land in Oregon. This is a tax write-off. There are some acres still available. You can get in now. We look for a 23% appreciation each year. In other words, after four years your money is doubled…”

“No, no, please sit back down.”

“What’s the matter?”

"I don't want to buy anything that I can't see, I don't want to buy anything that I can't reach out and touch."

"You mean, you don't trust me?"

"I just met you."

"I have world-wide recommendations!"

"I always go by my instincts."

Vin Marbad spun back toward the couch where he had left his coat; he slipped into it and then with briefcase he rushed to the door, opened it, was out, closed it.

"You've hurt his feelings," said Sarah. "He's just trying to show you some ways to save money."

"I have two rules. One is, never trust a man who smokes a pipe. The other is, never trust a man with shiny shoes."

"He wasn't smoking a pipe."

"Well, he looks like a pipe smoker."

"You hurt his feelings."

"Don't worry, he'll be back..."

The door flung open and there was Vin Marbad. He rushed across the room to his original place on the couch, took off his coat again, placed the briefcase at his feet. He looked at me.

"Michael tells me you play the horses."

"Well, yeah..."

"My first job when I came here from India was at Hollywood Park. I was a janitor there. You know the brooms they use to sweep up the discarded tickets?"

"Yeah."

"Ever notice how wide they are?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that was my idea. Those brooms used to be regular size. I designed the new broom. I went to Operations with it and they put it to use. I moved up into Operations and I've been moving up ever since."

I poured him another wine. He took a sip.

"Listen, do you drink when you write?"

"Yes, quite a bit."

"That's part of your inspiration. I'll make that tax deductible."

“Can you do that?”

“Of course. You know, I was the one who began making deductions for gasoline use in the automobile. That was my idea.”

“Son of a bitch,” I said.

“Very interesting,” said Sarah.

“I’ll fix it so you won’t have to pay any taxes at all and it will all be legal.”

“Sounds nice.”

“Michael Huntington doesn’t pay taxes. Ask him.”

“I believe you. Let’s not pay taxes.”

“All right, but you must do what I tell you. First, you put a down payment on a house, then on a car. Get started. Get a good car. Get a new BMW.”

“All right.”

“What do you type on? A manual?”

“Yes.”

“Get an electric. It’s tax deductible.”

“I don’t know if I can write on an electric.”

“You can pick it up in a couple of days.”

“I mean, I don’t know if I can *create* on an electric.”

“You mean, you’re afraid to change?”

“Yes, he is,” said Sarah. “Take the writers of past centuries, they used quill pens. Back then, he would have held on to that quill pen, he would have fought any change.”

“I worry too much about my god damned soul.”

“You change your brands of booze, don’t you?” asked Vin.

“Yeah…”

“O.K., then…”

Vin lifted his glass, drained it.

I poured the wine around.

“What we want to do is to make you a Corporation, so you get all the tax breaks.”

“It sounds awful.”

“I told you, if you don’t want to pay taxes you must do as I say.”

"All I want to do is type, I don't want to carry around a big load."

"All you do is to appoint a Board of Directors, a Secretary, Treasurer, so forth…It's easy."

"It sounds horrible. Listen, all this sounds like pure shit. Maybe I'd be better off just paying taxes. I just don't want anybody bothering me. I don't want a tax man knocking on my door at midnight. I'll even pay extra just to make sure they leave me alone."

"That's stupid," said Vin, "nobody should ever pay taxes."

"Why don't you give Vin a chance? He's just trying to help you," said Sarah.

"Look, I'll mail you the Corporation papers. Just read them over and then sign them. You'll see that there's nothing to fear."

"All this stuff, you see, it gets in the way. I'm working on this screenplay and I need a clear mind."

"A screenplay, huh? What's it about?"

"A drunk."

"Ah, you, huh?"

"Well, there are others."

"I've got him drinking wine now," said Sarah. "He was about dead when I met him. Scotch, beer, vodka, gin, ale…"

"I've been a consultant for Darby Evans for some years now. You heard of him, he's a screenwriter."

"I don't go to movies."

"He wrote *The Bunny That Hopped Into Heaven*; *Waffles with Lulu*; *Terror in the Zoo*. He's easily into six figures. And, he's a Corporation."

I didn't answer.

"He hasn't paid a dime in taxes. And, it's all legal…"

"Give Vin a chance," said Sarah.

I lifted my glass.

"All right. Shit. Here's to it!"

"Atta boy," said Vin.

I drained my glass and got up and found another bottle. I got the cork out and poured all around.

I let my mind go along with it: you're a wheeler dealer. You're slick. Why pay for bombs that mangle helpless children? Drive a BMW. Have a view of the harbor. Vote Republican.

Then another thought came to my mind: Are you becoming what you've always hated? And then the answer came: Shit, you don't have any real money anyhow. Why not play around with this thing for laughs? We went on drinking, celebrating something.

9

So, there I was over 65 years old, looking for my first house. I remembered how my father had virtually mortgaged his whole life to buy a house. He had told me, “Look, I’ll pay for one house in my lifetime and when I die you’ll get that house and then in your lifetime you’ll pay for a house and when you die you’ll leave those houses to your son. That’ll make two houses. Then your son will...”

The whole process seemed terribly slow to me: house by house, death by death. Ten generations, ten houses. Then it would take just one person to gamble all those houses away, or burn them down with a match and then run down the street with his balls in a fruit-picker’s pail.

Now I was looking for a house I really didn’t want and I was going to write a screenplay I really didn’t want to write. I was beginning to lose control and I realized it but I seemed unable to reverse the process.

The first realtor we stopped at was in Santa Monica. It was called TwentySecond Century Housing. Now, that was modern.

Sarah and I got out of the car and walked in. There was a young fellow at the desk, bow tie, nice striped shirt, red suspenders. He looked hip. He was shuffling papers at his desk. He stopped and looked up.

“Can I help you?”

“We want to buy a house,” I said.

The young fellow just turned his head to one side and kept looking away. A minute went past. Two minutes.

“Let’s go,” I said to Sarah.

We got back into the car and I started the engine.

“What was all that about?” Sarah asked.

“He didn’t want to do business with us. He took a reading and he thought we were indigent, worthless. He thought we would waste his time."

"But it's not true."

"Maybe not, but the whole thing made me feel as if I was covered with slime."

I drove the car along, hardly knowing where I was going.

Somehow, that had hurt. Of course, I was hungover and I needed a shave and I always wore clothing that somehow didn't seem to fit me quite right and maybe all the years of poverty had just given me a certain look. But I didn't think it was wise to judge a man from the outside like that. I would much rather judge a man on the way he acted and spoke.

"Christ," I laughed, "maybe nobody will sell us a house!"

"The man was a fool," said Sarah.

"TwentySecond Century Housing is one of the largest real estate chains in the state."

"The man was a fool," Sarah repeated.

I still felt diminished. Maybe I was a jerk-off of some kind. All I knew how to do was to type—sometimes.

Then we were in a hilly area driving along.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Topanga Canyon," Sarah answered.

"This place looks fucked."

"It's all right except for floods and fires and burned-out-neohippy types."

Then I saw the sign: APES HAVEN. It was a bar. I pulled up alongside and we got out. There was a cluster of bikes outside. Sometimes called hogs.

We went in. It was damn near full. Fellows in leather jackets. Fellows wearing dirty scarfs. Some of the fellows had scabs on their faces. Others had beards that didn't grow quite right. Most of the eyes were pale blue and round and listless. They sat very still as if they had been there for weeks.

We found a couple of stools.

"Two beers," I said, "anything in a bottle."

The barkeep trotted off.

The beers came back and Sarah and I had a hit.

Then I noticed a face thrust forward along the bar looking at us. It was a very fat round face, a touch imbecilic. It was a young man and his hair and his beard were a dirty red, but his eyebrows were pure white. His lower lip hung down as if an invisible weight were pulling at it, the lip was twisted and you saw the inner lip and it was wet and it shimmered.

"Chinaski," he said, "son of a bitch, it's CHINASKI!"

I gave a small wave, then looked straight ahead.

"One of my readers," I said to Sarah.

"Oh oh," she said.

"Chinaski," I heard a voice to my right.

"Chinaski," I heard another voice.

A whiskey appeared before me. I lifted it, "Thank you, fellows!" and I knocked it off.

"Go easy," said Sarah, "you know how you are. We'll never get out of here."

The bartender brought another whiskey. He was a little guy with dark red blotches all over his face. He looked meaner than anybody in there. He just stood there, staring at me.

"Chinaski," he said, "the world's greatest writer."

"If you insist," I said and raised the glass of whiskey. Then I passed it to Sarah who knocked it off.

She gave a little cough and set the glass down.

"I only drank that to help save you."

Then there was a little group gathering slowly behind us.

"Chinaski. Chinaski. . . Motherfuck. . . I've read all your books, ALL YOUR BOOKS!...I can kick your ass, Chinaski .„. . Hey, Chinaski, can you still get it up?...Chinaski, Chinaski, can I read you one of my poems?"

I paid the barkeep and we backed off our stools and moved toward the door. Again I noticed the leather jackets and the *blandness* of the faces and the feeling that there wasn't much joy or daring in any of them. There was something totally missing in the poor fellows and something in me wrenched, for just a moment, and I felt like throwing my arms around them, consoling and embracing them like some Dostoyevsky, but I knew that would finally lead nowhere except to ridicule and humiliation, for myself and for them. The world had somehow gone too far, and spontaneous kindness could never be so easy. It was something we would all have to work for once again.

And they followed us out. “Chinaski, Chinaski…Who’s your beautiful lady? You don’t deserve her, man!…Chinaski, come on, stay and drink with us! Be a good guy! Be like your writing, Chinaski! Don’t be a prick!”

They were right, of course. We got in the car and I started the engine and we drove slowly through them as they crowded around us, slowly giving way, some of them blowing kisses, some of them giving me the finger, a few beating on the windows. We got through.

We made it to the road and drove along.

“So,” said Sarah, “those are your readers?”

“That’s most of them, I think.”

“Don’t any intelligent people read you?”

“I hope so.”

We kept driving along not saying anything. Then Sarah asked, “What are you thinking about?”

“Dennis Body.”

“Dennis Body? Who’s that?”

“He was my only friend in grammar school. I wonder whatever happened to him.”

10

As we drove along, I saw it: Rainbow Realty.

I pulled up in front. The parking area was not paved and there were large potholes and ruts everywhere. I located the flatest surface, then parked. We got out and walked to the office. The door was open and a fat dirty white chicken sat there. I nudged it with my foot. It stood up, emitted a bit of matter and walked into the office, found a place in the corner and sat down again.

There was a lady at the desk, mid-forties, thin, with straight mud-colored hair embossed with a paper flower, red. She was drinking a beer and smoking a Pall Mall.

“Shit, howdy!” she greeted us, “looking for a place, roundabouts?”

“You might say,” I answered.

“Well, say it then! Ha, ha, ha!”

She knocked her beer off, handed me a card:

RAINBOW REALTY
Indeed, I got what you need.
Lila Gant, at your service

Lila stood up.

"Follow me..."

She didn't lock the office. She got into her car. It was a '62 Comet. I knew because I once had a '62 Comet. In fact, it looked like the same one I had sold for junk.

We followed her up a rural winding dirt road. We drove for some minutes. I noted the absence of street lights. Also, on each side of the road were deep canyons. I made a note that driving along there at night with a few drinks in you could be hazardous.

Finally, we pulled up in front of an unpainted wooden house. Well, it had been painted, once, a long time ago but the weather had worn away almost all the paint that had been a henshit white to begin with. The house seemed to sag forward and to the left—our left, as we got out of the car. It was a big house, looked homey, earthy.

All of this, I thought, because I've accepted an advance to write a screenplay and because I've got a tax consultant.

We walked up on the porch and the boards, of course, sagged under our weight. I scaled in at 228, most of it fat instead of muscle. My fighting days were over. To think I had once weighed 144 pounds on a 6-foot frame: the grand old starving days when I was writing the good stuff.

Lila beat on the front door.

"Darlene, honey? You decent? You better be because our butts are a-comin' in! Got some folks who wanna see your castle! Ha, ha, ha!"

Lila pushed the door open and we walked in.

It was dark inside and it smelled like there was a turkey burning in the oven. Also, there was the feeling of shadowy winged creatures floating about. A light bulb hung down from a cord. The insulation had peeled away and you could see the bare wire. I felt something like a cold wind at the back of my neck. Then I realized it was only a rush of fear. I shook that idea off with the thought, this place has got to be really cheap.

Then Darlene emerged from the darkness. Big lipstick mouth. Hair in all directions. Eyes gushing kindness to cover up years of waste. She was fat in blue jeans and faded flower blouse. Two earrings like eyeballs, they hung there swinging a bit, those blue irises. She was holding a rolled joint. She rushed forward.

"Lila, you chippy! What's hangin'?"

Lila took the joint from Darlene's hand, took a drag, handed it back.

"How's your ol' peg-legged-fool-of-a-brother, Willy?"

"Oh, shit, he just got thrown in county jail. He's scared shitless they're gonna get him in the ass!"

"Don't worry, honey, he's too hog-ugly."

"You really think so?"

"Really."

"I hope so!"

Then we were introduced around. Then there was silence. We stood there as if we had lost all power of thought, of what we were about. I rather liked it. I thought, well, this is all right, I can stand around here as long as anybody. I concentrated on the twisted wire of the light bulb cord.

A tall thin man slowly entered. He walked toward us, one stiff leg at a time. He put one leg forward and then deliberately followed it with the other. He was like a blind man without a cane. He came toward us. His face was a mass of beard and the thick hair was twisted, tangled. But he had beautiful eyes, a dark dark green. Emeralds for eyes. The sucker was worth something. And he had a *big smile*. He walked closer. Stopped and kept *smiling*, *smiling*.

"This is my husband," said Darlene, "this is Double Quartet."

He nodded. Sarah and I nodded back.

Lila leaned toward me, whispered, "They both usta be in the movie business."

Sarah was getting tired of the time all this took.

"Well, let's have a look at the place!"

"Why, *sure*, honey, you all bring your ass and folia me..."

We followed Lila into the other room and as we did I glanced back. I saw Double Quartet take the joint from Darlene and have a drag.

Jesus, he had such great eyes; eyes are truly the reflection of the soul. But, damn, that *big big smile* ruined it all.

We were evidently in the dining room or the front room. There was no furniture. There was an empty water bed nailed to one of the walls and across the water bed, scrawled in red paint was:

THE SPIDER SINGS ALONE

“Looka this,” Lila said, “look at that yard. Some nice land!”

We looked out of the window. The yard was like the road, only more so: large potholes, neglected mounds of dirt and rock. And out there, sitting all by itself, upright, was a lone, discarded toilet. The lid was missing.

“That’s nice,” I said, “kind of odd.”

“These here people are ARTISTS,” said our realtor.

We stepped back. I touched the curtain that covered the window. Where I touched it a piece of the curtain dropped away.

“These here people are *deep* inside,” said Lila. “They just don’t bother with the *ordinaries*, you know.”

We went upstairs and the stairway was solid, strangely so. It was good and true, and I felt a little better then, walking up there.

All that there was in the bedroom was a waterbed but this one was full. It sat in the far corner, lonely by itself. One strange thing, there was a large swelling at one edge. It gave the impression of an explosion to come.

The bathroom was tiled but the floor had gone unwashed for so long that the tiles had almost disappeared in the smear of dirt and footprints.

The toilet was brown-crusted, forever. No ever changing that. There was crust upon crust upon crust. It was worse than any toilet I had ever seen in any dive, in any bar I had ever been in, and I began to gag at the memory of all those crappers and at the thought of this one here. I walked out for a moment, steadied myself, inhaled, made up my mind not to think about any of it, and then re-entered the bathroom.

“Sorry,” I said.

Lila understood. “Shit, pard,” she said. “It’s all right…”

I didn't look in the bathtub but did note that somebody had scrawled with various colored paints on the wall over the bathtub:

IF TIM LEARY AIN'T GOD,
THEN GOD IS DEAD.

MY FATHER DIED IN THE

ABRAHAM LINCOLN BRIGADE

AND THE DEVIL HAS A PUSSY

CHARLES LINDBERG WAS

A

COCKSUCKER

There were a few other messages painted here and there but they were smeared and garbled and difficult to read.

"I'm gonna let you two wander about, you know, so you can get the feel. Buying a home is a real head-shaker. I don't want to rush you none."

Then Lila left. We heard her going down the stairway. Sarah and I stepped out into the hallway. Hanging near us, from a frayed rope, was an old rusted coffeepot.

"Oh my god," Sarah said suddenly, "my god!"

"What is it?"

"I've seen photos of this house before! I remember now! I thought it looked familiar!"

"What? What is it?"

"This is one of the houses where Charles Manson killed somebody!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Let's get out of here..."

We went on down the stairway. They were waiting for us down there: Lila, Darlene and Double Quartet.

"Well," asked Lila, "what do you think?"

"I've got your card with your phone number," I told her, "We can get in touch."

"If you people are artists," said Darlene, "we can knock some off the price. We like artists. Are you artists?"

"No," I said. "Well, I'm not, anyhow."

"I can show you some more places," said Lila.

"No, no," said Sarah, "we've seen enough today. We have to rest up."

We had to push past them, and all the time Double Quartet just kept *smiling, smiling*...

11

Back at my place there were two envelopes. While Sarah got a bottle of wine I opened one of the envelopes. It was a manuscript of some sort, with a covering note:

> Chinaski! Piss on you! You were once a great writer! Now you suck! You've sold out! My grandmother writes better shit than you do! You've had your head up your asshole too long! I sent my stuff to your publisher and he sent back a letter. He said "Thank you for submitting but we are overstocked." The prick, I'll overstock his butthole! He gobbles shit for breakfast!
>
> The great poets are ignored. They are afraid of the great poets! You were once a great poet but now you are only a band-aid covering a pus-hole! You gobble your own weenie under a sky of vomit! You've sold your balls to the butcher! You've killed the baby of your love! You are monkey stink! Forever and ever and ever!
>
> I enclose some of my latest work…

He signed his name with a leaping downward stroke to the right, making a long curving line after the last letter of his name, and below that, what appeared to be a drawing of a face.

It was an envelope full of poems, none of them typewritten. They were hastily printed in blue ink on yellow paper with thin blue lines.

Sarah brought the wine bottle and corkscrew, opened it herself and poured two glasses.

"Charles Manson," she said, "no wonder they wanted to let that place go cheap."

"I'm glad you remembered the photographs."

Sarah opened the *Herald Examiner* and I began on the first poem:

THE POET
they slay the poet
they burn the poet
they ignore the poet
they hate the poet

but the moon knows
the poet
and the prostitutes
know
the agony of the
poet
and they give it to him
for free
they lick the hair
of his balls in
holy prayer

the poet will not die

even in death
he sits inside the
moon
and gives the finger
to the
universe!

THE POET AT PLAY:
I suck her strawberry
tits.
I suck the hairs of
her ass.
I eat her vanilla

come.
at dawn she sucks
my toes.
I sneeze through my
ass.
she laughs.
we
sleep.

I didn't feel inclined to read the remainder of the manuscript. I knew what the remaining poems would be about: THE POET.

Sarah looked up from the *Herald Examiner*.

"Somebody send you some more poems to read?"

"Yes, it happens 3 or 4 times a month."

"You're not a publisher. Why do they do it?"

"It's a hate-love relationship they feel toward me."

"How are his poems?"

"He's not as good as he thinks he is, but then most of us feel that way."

"You get poems from Women too, right?"

"Yeah. Some of them with nude photos and come-ons. They think I can get them published. Or they want a blurb for the cover of some small press book."

"Those dirty cunts!"

"Right!"

We clicked our glasses, drained them, then I poured two more.

I opened the other envelope. It was from Vin Marbad:

ARTICLES OF INCORPORATION

I began reading. The jargon was Corporate Lawyer. I tried to break it down into plain English and a part I disliked immediately said:

> If the President of the Corporation is judged insane by a court-appointed psychiatrist the other members of said Corporation may by a majority vote divide all the assets of said Corporation equally among themselves.

I took my pen and crossed this passage out with heavy dark lines. Then I poured another drink after emptying my glass and read on:

> If the President of said Corporation is judged incapable to carry out his duties because of the use of drugs or intoxicating beverages, or if he is deemed sexually overactive detrimental to the common good of Society or the Corporation, then after a majority vote of said members, the President of said Corporation will be placed in a role of diminished authority and all assets of said Corporation will be divided equally among the remaining members.

I took my pen and heavily marked out this section. Then read further:

> If the President of the Corporation is judged senile…

I crossed out this passage.

> If the President of the Corporation is addicted to gambling…

Cross out.

> The President of the Corporation is allowed one vote equal to the vote of each member, all votes counting the same…

Cross out.

I read on and on. It was horrifying, it seemed barbaric. It was terrifying. I crossed out passage after passage. There must have been 17 or 18 pages. When I finished, the pages were a mass of black lines.

Sarah brought another bottle. I pushed the pages away.

“God Almighty, God Almighty, this has made me sick! This is wretched and pitiful stuff! I can’t believe it!”

“Don’t sign that crap then,” said Sarah.

“Never,” I said.

I found a piece of paper, then wrote on it; “Vin: I can’t do it. This is a nightmare in hell!”

Then I jammed everything into the stamped return envelope and pushed it away to mail later.

“It’s been a long day,” said Sarah.

“And Charles Manson is not the only killer,” I added.

“You know,” she said, “he bumped them right off. The others do it from a distance and seldom get caught.”

“Let’s drink a while,” I said, “and readjust to our own reality.”

“Let’s drink until the sun comes up.”

“Really?”

“Sure, why not?”

“You’re on,” I said, already feeling much better.

12

The place I was living in at that time did have some qualities. One of the finest was the bedroom which was painted a dark, dark blue. That dark dark blue had provided a haven for many a hangover, some of them brutal enough to almost kill a man, especially at a time when I was popping pills which people would give me without my bothering to ask what they were. Some nights I knew that if I slept I would die. I would walk around alone all night, from the bedroom to the bathroom and from the bathroom through the front room and into the kitchen. I opened and closed the refrigerator, time and time again. I turned the faucets on and off. Then I went to the bathroom and turned the faucets on and off. I flushed the toilet. I pulled at my ears. I inhaled and exhaled. Then, when the sun came up, I knew I was safe. Then I would sleep with the dark dark blue walls, healing.

Another feature of that place were the knocks of unsavory women at 3 or 4 a.m. They certainly weren't ladies of great charm, but having a foolish turn of mind, I felt that somehow they brought me adventure. The real fact of the matter was that many of them had no place else to go. And they liked the fact that there was drink and that I didn't work too hard trying to bed down with them.

Of course, after I met Sarah, this part of my lifestyle changed quite a bit.

That neighborhood around Carlton Way near Western Avenue was changing too. It had been almost all lower-class white, but political troubles in Central America and other parts of the world had brought a new type of individual to the neighborhood. The male usually was small, a dark or light brown, usually young. There were wives, children, brothers, cousins, friends. They began filling up the apartments and courts. They lived many to an apartment and I was one of the few whites left in the court complex.

The children ran up and down, up and down the court walkway. They all seemed to be between two and seven years old. They had no bikes or toys. The wives were seldom seen. They remained inside, hidden. Many of the men also remained inside. It was not wise to let the landlord know how many people were living in a single unit. The few men seen outside were the legal renters. At least they paid the rent. How they survived was unknown. The men were small, thin, silent, unsmiling. Most sat on the porch steps in their undershirts, slumped forward a bit, occasionally smoking a cigarette. They sat on the porch steps for hours, motionless. Sometimes they purchased very old junk automobiles and the men drove them slowly about the neighborhood. They had no auto insurance or driver's licenses and they drove with expired license plates. Most of the cars had defective brakes. The men almost never stopped at the corner stop sign and often failed to heed red lights, but there were few accidents. Something was watching over them.

After a while the cars would break down but my new neighbors wouldn't leave them on the street. They would drive them up the walkways and park them directly outside their door. First they would work on the engine. They would take off the hood and the engine would rust in the rain. Then they would put the car on blocks and remove the wheels. They took the wheels inside and kept them there so they wouldn't be stolen at night.

While I was living there, there were two rows of cars lined up in the court, just sitting there on blocks. The men sat motionless on their porches in their undershirts. Sometimes I would nod or wave to them. They never responded. Apparently they couldn't understand or read the eviction notices and they tore them up, but I did see them studying the daily L. A. papers. They were stoic and durable because compared to where they had come from, things were now easy.

Well, no matter. My tax consultant had suggested I purchase a house, and so for me it wasn't really a matter of "white flight." Although, who knows? I had noticed that each time I had moved in Los Angeles over the years, each move had always been to the North and to the West.

Finally, after a few weeks of house hunting, we found the one. After the down payment the monthly payments came to $789.81. There was a huge hedge in front on the street and the yard was also in front so the house sat way back on the lot. It looked like a damned good place to hide. There was even a stairway, an upstairs with a bedroom, bathroom and what was to become my typing room. And there was an old desk left in there, a huge ugly old thing. Now, after decades, I was a writer with a desk. Yes, I felt the fear, the fear of becoming like them. Worse, I had an assignment to write a screenplay. Was I doomed and damned, was I about to be sucked dry? I didn't feel it would be that way. But does anybody, ever?

Sarah and I moved our few possessions in.

The big moment came. I sat the typewriter down on the desk and I put a piece of paper in there and I hit the keys. The typewriter still worked. And there was plenty of room for an ashtray, the radio and the bottle. Don't let anybody tell you different. Life begins at 65.

13

Down at the Marina del Rey times were getting hard. For transportation Jon Pinchot was driving a green 1968 Pontiac convertible and François Racine drove a brown 1958 Ford. They also had two Kawasaki motorcycles, a 750 and a 1000.

Wenner Zergog had borrowed the 1958 Ford and by driving the car without putting water in the radiator had cracked the engine block.

"He's a genius," Jon told me. "He doesn't know about such things."

The motorcycles were the first to go. The 1958 was used for shorter trips.

Then François Racine packed off for France. Jon sold the 1958 Ford.

And then, of course, the day came when the phone rang and there was Jon.

"I've got to move. They are going to tear this place down and build a hotel or something. Shit, I don't know where to go. I'd like to stay in town and work out a deal for your screenplay. How's that thing coming along?"

"Oh, it's coming..."

"I'm close to a deal. And if it falls through I've got a guy in Canada. But I've got to move. The bulldozers are on the way."

"Listen, Jon, you can stay at our place. We've got a downstairs bedroom."

"You mean that?"

"Sure..."

"I'll be out most of the time. You won't know I'm there."

"You still have that 1968 Pontiac?"

"Yes..."

"Then put your stuff in and come on over..."

I walked downstairs and told Sarah. “Jon is moving in for a while.”

“What?”

“Jon Pinchot. They’re going to bulldoze his place. He’ll be staying here a while.”

“Hank, you know you can’t stand living with people. It will drive you crazy.”

“It will just be for a little while...”

“You’ll be upstairs typing and he’ll be downstairs listening. It won’t work.”

“I’ll make it work. Jon has paid me money to write this thing.”

“Good luck,” she said, then turned and walked into the kitchen.

The first two nights weren’t bad: Jon and Sarah and I just drank and talked. Jon told some stories, mostly about problems with actors and what he had had to do to get them to perform. There was one fellow, halfway through a shooting, who suddenly refused to talk. He would rehearse the scenes but he wouldn’t speak. He was demanding that a certain scene be shot as he wished. They were in the middle of a jungle somewhere and running out of time and money. Finally Jon told the actor, “Shit, have it your way!” And the actor acted out the scene his way, with dialog. Only he didn’t know that there wasn’t any film in the camera. After that, there were no problems.

It was on the second night that the wine really flowed. I did some talking myself, mostly repeat stuff, stuff that I had already typed up long ago. It was early in the a.m. when Jon said, “Giselle has fallen in love with a director with one ball...”

Giselle was Jon’s girlfriend in Paris.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Only it’s worse now. Cancer. They have cut out the other ball too. Giselle is very very distraught.”

“It sure seems like bad luck.”

“Yes, yes, I write her, I phone her...I do all I can to help. And there they are in the middle of a shooting...”

(Everything always happened in the middle of a shooting.)

Giselle was a famous actress in France. She shared an apartment with Jon in Paris.

We attempted to cheer Jon up about his girlfriend's bad luck. He unpeeled a long cigar, licked it, bit off the end, lit up, inhaled and let out the first plume of exotic smoke.

"You know, Hank, I always knew that you would write a screenplay for me. There are things that a man knows instinctively. I've known this for a long time. And I've been searching for the money to do this for a long time, long before I contacted you."

"Maybe I'll write a very bad screenplay."

"You won't. I've read everything you've written."

"That's past. In the writing profession there are more has-beens than anything else."

"This does not apply to you."

"I believe he's right, Hank," said Sarah, "you're just a natural-ass writer."

"But a *screenplay*! Shit, it's like I've been roller skating and now you put me on an ice rink!"

"You'll do it. I know you'll do it, I knew you would do it when I was in Russia."

"Russia?"

"Yes, before I met you I went to Russia looking for the money to produce your future screenplay."

"Which I didn't know anything about yet."

"Exactly. Only I knew. Anyhow, I heard from a reliable source that there was a woman in Russia who had $80 million in a Swiss account."

"Sounds like a cheap TV thriller."

"Yes, I know. But I checked. I have sources for this kind of thing that are very good. I can't tell you too much about them."

"We don't want to know," said Sarah.

"So I found out the lady's address. And then began the long slow process. I began writing the lady letters..."

"What did you do?" asked Sarah, "put in frontal nude photos?"

"Or anal nudes?" I asked.

"Not at first. At first the letters were quite formal. I told her that I had come upon her address in the strangest way, that I had found it scribbled on a tiny piece of paper in a shoe box in a closet in Paris. I suggested that we might be destined. Oh, you have no idea how hard I worked on those letters!"

"You'd do all this to get money to produce a movie?"

"More than that!"

"Would you kill?"

"Please don't ask me that. Anyway, I sent letter after letter, gradually turning them into love letters."

"I didn't know you knew Russian," said Sarah.

"I wrote the letters in French. The lady had an interpreter. The lady responded in Russian and then my interpreter put them into the French."

"They wouldn't use that even in a cheap TV thriller," I said.

"I know. But I thought about her $80 million in that Swiss account and my letters to her got better and better. Love letters. Red hot."

"Have some more wine," I said refilling Jon's glass.

"Well, she finally asked me to come see her. And suddenly like that, I was in the snows of Moscow..."

"The snows of Moscow..."

"I got a room that I think was bugged by the KGB. I think they even had the toilet bugged. They could hear my shit dropping."

"I think I hear it dropping too..."

"No, no, listen to me...I finally made an appointment to see the lady. I went to her place, I knocked. The door opened and there stood this beautiful girl! Never have I seen such a *beautiful* girl!"

"Ah, god, Jon, *please*..."

"Only it wasn't the *lady*, it was the interpreter!"

"Jon," Sarah asked, "what are you drinking beside this wine?"

"Nothing! Nothing! It's *true*! I walked into the room and there was an old hag sitting there dressed in black. She had no teeth but many warts. I walked forward, bent down, took her hand, closed my eyes and kissed it. The interpreter sat in a chair and watched us. I turned to the interpreter.

" 'I'd like to be alone with *you*,' I said.

"She spoke to the old woman. Then she turned to me and said, 'Metra desires to be alone with you. But in a church. Metra is very religious.'

" 'I believe that I am in love with you,' I told the interpreter.

"She spoke to the old woman. The old woman spoke back to her. Then the interpreter spoke to me: 'Metra says that love is possible but first she wants you to go to church with her.'

"I nodded yes and the old lady got up slowly from her chair, and we left the room together, leaving the beautiful young girl behind..."

"This fucking thing could win an Academy Award," I said.

"Please. Remember, I am trying to get the money for your future screenplay."

"Yes, please go on, Jon. Tell me the rest..."

"All right, we got to the church. We kneeled in the pews. I am not religious. We kneeled for some time in silence. Then she tugged at me. We rose and went forward to an altar full of candles. Some were lit. Many weren't. She started lighting many of the unlit candles. It excited her. Her mouth trembled and little streams of saliva came down out of each corner of her mouth. It ran down and disappeared into her wrinkles. Please believe me, I have nothing, nothing against old age! But why is it that some people age so much worse than others?"

"I dunno," I said, "but I have an idea that people who don't think too much tend to look young longer."

"I don't think this one thought too much...anyhow, after lighting many candles she became excited again. She took my hand and squeezed it. She was strong, a strong old lady. She pulled me over to a statue of Christ..."

"Yes..."

"She let go of me and kneeled and started kissing the feet of this Christ. She went at it. The toes were wet with her saliva.

She was in a grand passion. She was quivering. Then she stood up, took my hand, pointed to the feet. I smiled. She pointed again. I smiled again.

Then she grabbed me and started pushing me down to the feet. Shit, I thought, and then I thought of $80 million and I kneeled down and kissed the feet. You know, they don't clean those feet well in Russia. Metra's saliva…and the dust…it was only with great will that I was able to kiss. Then I stood up. Metra led me back to the pew. We knelt again. Suddenly she grabbed me and her mouth was on mine. Please understand, I have nothing against the old, the aged, but it was like kissing a sewer hole. I pulled away. Something turned in my stomach and I went to the confessional booth, pulled back the curtains, entered, kneeled and puked. Then I rose and we left the church together. I left her at her doorway. Then I got a bottle of vodka and went back to my room.

"You know, if I wrote a screenplay like that they'd run me out of town."

"I know. But wait. This thing is not over. Drinking the vodka, I thought it all over. No need to back off. The old lady was evidently crazy. One doesn't kiss in church, does one? Maybe at a wedding. So there I was…"

"Kiss and get married, huh?" I asked.

"Well, I wanted to be sure of the $80 million. After finishing the vodka, I began a long love letter to Metra, only all the time I was thinking of the interpreter. It was some love letter. And in between the love talk I explained to her that I wanted to make a film about the two of us and that I had heard of her money in Switzerland, only that had *nothing* to do with my being there, except that I was without funds and I wanted dearly to bring our love story to the screen and to the public and to the lovers of Christ."

"All this to get money to produce a screenplay that Hank didn't even know about and hadn't written?" asked Sarah.

"Absolutely," said Jon.

"You're crazy," I suggested.

"Maybe. Anyhow, the old lady got my love letter and I believed she had agreed to go to Switzerland with me to pick up the money. We made arrangements. Meanwhile there were two more trips, to kiss the feet of Christ and to light many candles plus some of the other kiss-kiss bit. Then...I got a call from my source. The woman who had the $80 million in Switzerland had the same exact name, was the same age of my old woman, but had been born in a different city of different parents. It was a stupid coincidence and it was over for me. I had been tricked. I'd have to get the money elsewhere..."

"That's one of the saddest fucking stories I've ever heard," I said.

"I'm sorry," said Jon, "But it's true."

"Why do you suffer like this just for the business of making movies?" asked Sarah.

"Because I love it," answered Jon.

14

A couple of days later we were back down at Danny Server's studio in Venice.

"Another guy has written a movie about skid row and drinking," said Jon, "so why don't you check it out?"

So we went there, Jon, Sarah and I. The people were already in their seats. But the bar was closed.

"The bar is closed," I said to Jon.

"Yes," he said.

"Listen, we've got to get something to drink..."

"There's a liquor store about a block away, toward the water, on the other side of the street."

"We'll be right back..."

We made it down there, got 2 bottles of red and a corkscrew. On the way back we were stopped twice for handouts. Then we were outside the studio. I pushed the door open and we entered. It was dark. The movie was rolling.

"Shit," I said, "I can't see! I can't see a fucking thing!"

Somebody hissed at me.

"Same to you," I said.

"Will you *please be quiet*!" a woman said.

"Let's try the first row of seats," said Sarah, "I think I see a couple of seats but I'm not sure."

We worked our way down front. I tripped over some feet.

"You bastard," I heard a man say softly.

"Blow it," I told him.

We finally located 2 seats and sat down. Sarah got out the cigarettes and the lighter while I corkscrewed open a bottle. We had no drinking glasses, so I took a pull and passed the bottle to Sarah. She took a pull and handed it back. Then she lit up 2 cigarettes for us.

The man who had written the movie, *Back From Hades*, had once had a series running on TV, one of those family shows. Pat Sellers. Well, the series had gone on and on but Pat lost the battle with the bottle and soon the series was doomed. Divorce. Loss of family, home. Pat was on skid row. Now Pat was making a comeback. Made this movie. He's dry. And on the lecture tour, helping others.

I took another hit of the wine, passed it to Sarah.

I watched the movie. They were down on skid row. It was night and they had built a little fire. The men and women looked fairly well-dressed for skid row. They really didn't look like bums. They looked like people who worked in Hollywood films, they looked like TV actors. And they each had a shopping cart in which they stored their earthly possessions. Only the shopping carts were brand new. They sparkled in the firelight. I had never seen shopping carts that new in any supermarket. Evidently they had been purchased for the movie itself.

"Gimme the bottle," I said to Sarah.

I lifted it high and took a good hit. I heard the hissing sound again, followed by another hissing sound.

"These people are ugly," I said to Sarah. "What the hell's wrong with them?"

"I don't know."

Back to the movie and the people in the firelight with their shopping carts. There was a man talking. The others listened.

"...I'd wake up and I wouldn't recognize the bed I was in, I wouldn't know where I was...I'd get dressed and go out and look for my car. I never knew where my car was. Sometimes it took hours to find it..."

"Hey, that's good," I said to Sarah, "that's happened to me plenty of times!"

There was another hissing sound.

"...I was in drunktank after drunktank...I often lost my wallet...I had my teeth kicked in...I was a lost soul...lost...lost. . . Then my drinking buddy, Mike, he got killed in a drunken car crash...that did it . .

Sarah took a hit.

"Now I am at peace…I sleep well…I'm beginning to feel like a functional human being again…And Christ is my high, greater than any drink the devil has put upon this earth!"

Tears were in the fellow's eyes.

I took another hit.

Then he recited a poem:

I am found again.
I am made over by ten.
I have lost the yen.
I am brother to my kin.
I am found again.

He bowed his head and the others applauded.

Then a woman began to speak. She had, she said, begun drinking at parties. And it had gone on from there. She began to drink alone at home. The plants died because she didn't water them. During an argument she slashed her daughter with a paring knife. Her husband began drinking also. Lost his job. Stayed at home. They drank together. Then she slashed *him* with a paring knife. One day she just got in her car and drove off with her suitcase and her credit cards. Drank in motels. Smoked and drank and watched TV. Vodka. She loved vodka. One night she set her bed on fire. A fire engine came to the motel. She was drunk in her nightie. One of the firemen squeezed her buttocks. She jumped into her car in just her nightie with only her purse. She drove and drove, in a daze. About noon the next day she was at 4th and Broadway. Two of the tires had gone flat as she was driving along. The tires had ripped off and she was driving on the rims, leaving deep grooves in the asphalt. A cop stopped her. She was taken in—for observation. The days went by. Her husband didn't come by or her daughter. She was alone. She was sitting with the shrink one day and the shrink asked her, "Why do you insist upon destroying yourself?" And when he asked her this it was no longer the face of the shrink looking at her but the face of Christ. That did it…

"How did she know it was the face of Christ?" I asked aloud.

"Who is that man?" I heard somebody ask.

My bottle of wine was empty. I corkscrewed open a new one.

Then another fellow told *his* story. The campfire just kept on burning and burning. Nobody had to add fuel to it. And no other bums came by and bothered them. When the fellow finished his story he reached into his shopping cart and pulled out a very expensive guitar.

I took a hit and passed the red to Sarah.

The fellow tuned his guitar, then began playing it and singing. He was right in tune, voice-trained. He sang away.

The camera panned around, capturing the look on all the faces. The faces were enthralled, some of them were crying, others had gentle, beautiful smiles. Then the singer finished and there was hearty and joyful applause.

"I never saw a skidrow like that one," I told Sarah.

The movie continued. Other actors spoke. Some others had expensive guitars. It was guitar night. Then the grand finale came. There was a shooting star. It arched high above the upturned faces. There was a small silence. Then a man began singing. Soon he was joined by a woman. Other voices joined. They all knew the words. Many guitars came out. It was an uplifting chorus of hope and unity. Then it was over. The movie was finished. The lights came on. There was a little stage. Pat Sellers mounted the stage. There was applause.

Pat Sellers looked awful. He looked sleepy, lifeless, dead. His eyes were blank. He began to speak.

"I have not had a drink in five hundred and ninety-five days..."

There was wild applause.

Sellers went on: "I am a recovering alcoholic...We are all recovering alcoholics..."

"Let's get out of here!" I said to Sarah.

We had finished the wine. We rose and moved toward the exit. We walked to our car.

"Son of a bitch," I said, "where's Jon? Why isn't he here?"

"Oh, I'm sure he'd seen the movie," said Sarah.

"He set us up. It's kind of funny when you think about it."

"Those were all A. A. members in there…"

We got in the car and headed toward the freeway.

My idea about the whole thing was that most people weren't alcoholics, they only *thought* that they were. It was something that couldn't be rushed. It took at least twenty years to become a bona fide alcoholic. I was on my 45th year and didn't regret any of it.

We got on the freeway and headed back toward reality.

15

I still had the screenplay to write. I was upstairs sitting in front of the IBM. Sarah was in the bedroom beyond the wall to my right. Jon was downstairs watching TV.

I was just sitting there. A half a bottle of wine was gone. I had never had trouble before. In decades, I had never had a writer's block. Writing had always been easy for me. The words just rolled out as I drank and listened to the radio.

I knew that Jon was just listening for the sound of the typer. I had to type something. I began a letter to a fellow who taught English at Cal State Long Beach. We had been exchanging letters for a couple of decades.

I began:

> Hello Harry:
>
> How's it hanging? They've been running good. Badly hungover other day, got to track for 2nd race, gotta win on a 10-to-one-shot. I no longer use the Racing Form. I see everybody reading it and almost everybody loses. I've got a new system, of course, which I can't tell you about. You know, if the writing goes to hell, I think I can make it at the track. Shit. I'll tell you my system, why shouldn't I? O.K. I buy a newspaper, any newspaper. I try to buy a different newspaper every day, just to shake up the gods. Then out of that newspaper I'll choose any handicapper. Then I'll line up his selections in order. Say there's an 8 horse race. On my program I will mark next to each horse the order of his selection. Example:
>
> horse 1. 7
> horse 2. 3
> horse 3. 5
> horse 4. 1
> horse 5. 2

horse 6. 4
horse 7. 8
horse 8. 6

The system? Well, you take the horse's odds that go off below the number of the handicapper's selection. If more than one set of odds goes off below, then take the greatest drop. For example, horse 1, selection 7 going off at 4-to-one is better than horse 6, selection 4 going off at 3-to-one. There is one exception to this system. If horse 4 goes off at below 1, that is 4/5 or below, then pass the race if there is nothing working against it. That is because plays on nothing but odds-on-favorites always show a loss.

The way I came up with this system was that when I was in highschool I was in the R.O.T.C. and we had to read the Manual of Arms and in this fat book there was a little bit about the Artillery. Now, remember this was 1936, long before radar and all the homing-in devices. In fact, the book was probably written for World War I, although it might have been compiled some time later, I'm not sure. Anyway, the way they figured how to lob an artillery shell was to take a consensus. The Captain would ask, "O.K., Larry, how far away do you think the enemy is?"

"625 yards, sir."

"Mike?"

"400 yards, sir."

"Barney?"

"100 yards, sir."

"Slim?"

"800 yards, sir."

"Bill?"

"300 yards."

Then the Captain would add up the yards and divide by the number of men asked. In this case, the answer would be 445 yards. They'd log the shell and generally blow up a large proportion of the enemy.

> Decades later I was sitting at the track one day and the Manual of Arms came back to me and I thought, why not apply the Artillery system to the horses? This system has worked for me most of the time, but the problem was and is human nature: one gets bored with the routine and sets off in another direction. I must have at least 25 systems all based on some kind of crazy logic. I like to move around.
>
> Now you ask, how the hell did I land on a 10-to-one shot in the 2nd race the other day. Well, it's like this, I write down the handicapper's selections before scratches. This horse happened to be selection #16 before scratches. When it went off at 10-to-one, curiously, it was the largest drop from the handicapper's selections. A rarity, true, but there it was. And when such things occur, they make one feel very odd indeed. Like maybe there's a chance sometimes. Well, I hope you're O.K. and that your young lady students don't give you a hard-on, or maybe I should hope that they do.
>
> Listen, is it true that Celine and Hemingway died on the same day?
>
> Hope you're all right...
>
> Keep 'em crying,
>
> yrs,
>
> Henry Chinaski

I took the sheet out of the typer, folded it, hand-printed the address on an envelope, stuck it inside, found a stamp, and there it was: my writing for the night. I sat there, finished the rest of the wine bottle, opened another one and walked downstairs.

Jon had turned off the TV and was sitting there. I brought two glasses and sat down next to him. I poured them around.

"The typer sounds hot," Jon said.

"Jon, I was writing a letter."

"A letter?"

"Have a drink."

"All right."

We both had one.

"Jon, you've paid me to write this fucking screenplay..."

"But, of course..."

"I can't write it. I'm up there trying to write the thing and you're down here listening for the sound of the typer. It's hard..."

"I could go some place at night."

"No, listen, you are going to have to move! I can't go on this way! I'm sorry, man, I'm a dog, a heel, I'm the heel of a dog! Do dogs have heels? Anyhow, you're going to have to find a place to live. I can't write this way, I'm not man enough."

"I understand."

"Do you?"

"Of course. But I was going to have to move anyhow."

"What?"

"François is coming back. His business in France is done. We are going to have to find a place together. I am looking now. In fact, today I think I found a place. I just didn't want to bother you with all this."

"But are you guys able to...?"

"We have money. We are consolidating our resources."

"Christ, then will you forgive me for wanting to throw you into the street?"

"There's nothing to forgive. I was only worried about how to tell you that I had to move out."

"You wouldn't bullshit an old drunk, would you?"

"No. But have you written anything?"

"A smidge..."

"Can I see it?"

"Sure, buddy."

I went upstairs, brought down the pages, put them on the coffee-table. Then I went back upstairs, went into the bedroom.

"Come on, Sarah, we're going to celebrate!"

"Celebrate what?"

"Jon's moving out. I'm going to be able to write again!"

“Did you hurt his feelings?”

“I don’t think so. You see, François is coming back, they have to find a place together.”

We went downstairs. Sarah got another glass. Jon was into the screenplay.

He laughed when he saw me.

“This stuff is fucking great! I knew that it would be!”

“You wouldn’t bullshit an old drunk, would you?”

“No. Never.”

Sarah sat down and we had a quiet drink together.

Jon spoke. “I used Wenner Zergog’s phone to call François. I found out François fucked up. He got canned. He got a few days’ pay, then got canned. Same old thing…”

“Like what?” asked Sarah.

“He’s a great actor but now and then he goes crazy. He’ll just forget the script and the scene he’s supposed to be doing and do his thing. It’s a sickness, I think. He must have done it again. He got canned.”

“What does he do?” I asked.

“It’s always the same. He does all right for a while. Then he fails to follow direction. I will tell him, ‘You walk over there and say your line.’ He won’t do it. He’ll walk somewhere else and say some other line. And I’ll ask him, ‘Why do you do this?’ and he’ll answer, ‘I don’t know. I have no idea.’ Once we were shooting and he walked away and pulled down his pants and bent over. He wasn’t wearing shorts.”

“God damn,” I said.

“Or, he will say things like, ‘We must hasten the natural process of death.’ Or, ‘All men’s lives diminish me.’ “

“Sounds like a hell of a guy.”

“Ah, he is…”

We drank into the early morning, far into the early morning.

I awakened about noon and went downstairs and knocked at Jon’s door. There was no answer. I opened the door. Jon was gone. There was a note.

Dear Hank and Sarah:

> Thanks much for all the drinks and everything. I felt like an honored guest.
>
> Hank, your screenplay is a justification of my belief in you. It is even better than that. Please continue it.
>
> I will phone you soon with my location and phone number.
>
> This is a wonderful day. It's Mozart's birthday. There will be beautiful music all day....
>
> yrs, Jon

The note made me feel terrible and good at the same time, which was the way I felt most of the time anyhow. I went upstairs, pissed, brushed my teeth and got back into bed with Sarah.

16

That night without Jon listening downstairs, the screenplay began to move. I was writing about a young man who wanted to write and drink but most of his success was with the bottle. The young man had been me. While the time had not been an unhappy time, it had been mostly a time of void and waiting. As I typed along, the characters in a certain bar returned to me. I saw each face again, the bodies, heard the voices, the conversations. There was one particular bar that had a certain deathly charm. I focused on that, relived the barroom fights with the bartender. I had not been a good fighter. To begin with my hands were too small and I was underfed, grossly underfed. But I had a certain amount of guts and I took a punch very well. My main problem during a fight was that I couldn't truly get angry, even when it seemed my life was at stake. It was all play-acting with me. It mattered and it didn't. Fighting the bartender was something to do and it pleased the patrons who were a clubby little group. I was the outsider. There is something to be said for drinking—all those fights would have killed me had I been sober but being drunk it was as if the body turned to rubber and the head to cement. Sprained wrists, puffed lips and battered kneecaps were about all I came up with the next day. Also, knots on the head from falling. How all this could become a screenplay, I didn't know. I only knew that it was the only part of my life I hadn't written much about. I believe that I was sane at that time, as sane as anybody. And I knew that there was a whole civilization of lost souls that lived in and off bars, daily, nightly and forever, until they died. I had never read about this civilization so I decided to write about it, the way I remembered it. The good old typer clicked along.

The next day about noon the phone rang. It was Jon.

"I have found a place. François is with me. It's beautiful, it has two kitchens and the rent is nothing, really nothing..."

"Where are you located?"

"We're in the ghetto in Venice. Brooks Avenue. All blacks. The streets are war and destruction. It's beautiful!"

"Oh?"

"You must come see the place!"

"When?"

"Today!"

"I don't know."

"Oh, you wouldn't want to miss this! There are people living under our house. We can hear them under there, talking and playing their radio! There are gangs everywhere! There's a large hotel somebody built down here. But nobody paid their rent. They boarded the place up, cut off the electricity, the water, the gas. But people still live there. THIS IS A WAR ZONE! The police do not come in here, it's like a separate state with its own rules. I love it! You must visit us!"

"How do I get there?"

Jon gave me the instructions, then hung up.

I found Sarah.

"Listen, I've got to go see Jon and François."

"Hey, I'm coming too!"

"No, you can't. It's in the ghetto in Venice."

"Oh, the ghetto! I wouldn't miss that for anything!"

"Look, do me a favor: please don't come along!"

"What? Do you think I would let you go down there all by yourself!" I got my blade, put my money in my shoes. "O.K.," I said....

We drove slowly into the Venice ghetto. It was not true that it was all black. There were some Latinos on the outskirts. I noted a group of 7 or 8 young Mexican men standing around and leaning against an old car. Most of the men were in their undershirts or had their shirts off. I drove slowly past, not staring, just taking it in. They didn't seem to be doing much. Just waiting. Ready and waiting. Actually, they were probably just bored. They looked like fine fellows. And they didn't look worried worth a shit.

Then we got to black turf. Right away, the streets were cluttered: a left shoe, an orange shirt, an old purse…a rotted grapefruit. . . another left shoe…a pair of bluejeans…a rubber tire…

I had to steer through the stuff. Two young blacks about eleven years old stared at us from bicycles. It was pure, perfect hate. I could feel it. Poor blacks hated. Poor whites hated. It was only when blacks got money and whites got money that they mixed. Some whites loved blacks. Very few, if any, blacks loved whites. They were still getting even. Maybe they never would. In a capitalistic society the losers slaved for the winners and you have to have more losers than winners. What did I think? I knew politics would never solve it and there wasn't enough time left to get lucky.

We drove on until we found the address, parked the car, got out, knocked.

A little window slid open and there was an eye looking at us.

"Ah, Hank and Sarah!"

The door opened, shut, and we were inside.

I walked to the window and looked out.

"What are you doing?" asked Jon.

"Just want to check the car now and then…"

"Oh, yes, come look, I'll show you the two kitchens!"

Sure enough there were two kitchens, a stove in each, a refrigerator in each, a sink in each.

"This used to be two places. It's been turned into one."

"Nice," said Sarah, "you can cook in one kitchen and François can cook in the other…"

"Right now we are living mostly on eggs. We have chickens, they lay many eggs…"

"Christ, Jon, is it that bad?"

"No, not really. We figure we are here for a long stand. We need most of our money for wine and cigars. How's the screenplay coming?"

"I'm happy to say that there are quite a few pages. Only sometimes I don't know about CAMERA, ZOOM IN, PAN IN…all that crap…"

"Don't worry, I'll take care of that."

"Where's François?" asked Sarah.

"Ah, he's in the other room…come…"

We went in and there was François spinning his little roulette wheel. When he drank his nose became very red, like a cartoon drunk. Also, the more he drank the more depressed he became. He was sucking on a wet half-finished cigar. He managed a few sad puffs. There was an almost empty bottle of wine nearby.

"Shit," he said, "I am now 60 thousand dollars in the hole and I am drinking this cheap wine of Jon's which he claims is good stuff but it is pure crap. He pays a dollar and 35 cents a bottle. My stomach is like a balloon full of piss! I am 60 thousand dollars in the hole and I have no visible means of employment. I must…kill . . myself…"

"Come on, François," said Jon, "let's show our friends the chickens…"

"The chickens! HEGGS! All the time we eat HEGGS! Nothing but HEGGS! Poop, poop, poop! The chickens poop HEGGS! All day, all night long my job is to save the chickens from the young black boys! All the time the young black boys climb the fence and run at the chicken coop! I hit them with a long stick, I say, 'You muthafiickas you stay away from my chickens which poop the HEGGS!' I cannot think, I cannot think of my own life or my own death, I am always chasing these young black boys with the long stick! Jon, I need more wine, another cigar!"

He gave the wheel another spin.

It was more bad news. The system was failing.

"You see, in France they only have one zero for the house! Here in America they have a zero and a double zero for the house! THEY TAKE BOTH YOUR BALLS! WHY? Come on, I'll show you the chickens…."

We walked into the yard and there were the chickens and the chicken coop. François had built it himself. He was good that way. He had a real talent for that. Only he hadn't used chicken wire. There were bars. And locks on each door.

"I give roll call each night. 'Cecile, you there?' 'Cluck, cluck,' she answers. 'Bernadette, you there?' 'Cluck, cluck,' she answers. And so on. 'Nicole?' I asked one night. She did not cluck. Can you believe it, through all the bars and all the locks they got Nicole! They have taken her out already! Nicole is gone, gone forever! Jon, Jon, I need more wine!"

We went back in and sat down and the new wine poured. Jon gave François a new cigar.

"If I can have my cigar when I want it," said François, "I can live."

We drank a while, then Sarah asked, "Listen, Jon is your landlord black?"

"Oh, yes..."

"Didn't he ask why you were renting here?"

"Yes..."

"And what did you tell him?"

"I told him that we were filmmakers and actors from France."

"And he said?"

"He said, 'oh.' "

"Anything else?"

"Yes, he said, 'well it's your ass!' "

We drank for some time making small talk.

Now and then I got up and went to the window to see if the car was still there.

As we drank on I began to feel guilty about the whole thing.

"Listen, Jon, let me give you the screenplay money back. I've driven you to the wall. This is terrible...."

"No, I want you to do this screenplay. It will become a movie, I promise you..."

"All right, god damn it..."

We drank a bit more.

Then Jon said, "Look..."

Through a hole in the wall where we were sitting could be seen a hand, a black hand. It was wriggling through the broken plaster, fingers gripping, moving. It was like a small dark animal.

"GO AWAY," yelled François. "GO AWAY MURDERER OF NICOLE! YOU HAVE LEFT A HOLE IN MY HEART FOREVER! GO AWAY!"

The hand did not go away.

François walked over to the wall and the hand.

"I tell you now, go away. I only wish to smoke my cigar and drink my wine in peace. You disturb my sight! I cannot feel right with you grabbing and looking at me through your poor black fingers!"

The hand did not go away.

"ALL RIGHT THEN!"

The stick was right there. With one demonic move François picked up the long stick and began whacking it against the wall, again and again and again…

"CHICKEN KILLER, YOU HAVE WOUNDED MY HEART FOREVER!"

The sound was deafening. Then François stopped.

The hand was gone.

François sat back down.

"Shit, Jon, my cigar is out! Why don't you buy better cigars, Jon?"

"Listen, Jon," I said, "we've got to be going now…"

"Oh, come now…please…the night is just *beginning*! You've seen nothing yet…"

"We've got to be going…I have more work to do on the screenplay…"

"Oh…in that case…"

Back at the house I went upstairs and did work on the screenplay but strangely or maybe not so strangely my past life hardly seemed as strange or wild or as mad as what was occurring now.

17

The screenplay went well. Writing was never work for me. It had been the same for as long as I could remember: turn on the radio to a classical music station, light a cigarette or a cigar, open the bottle. The typer did the rest. All I had to do was be there. The whole process allowed me to continue when life itself offered very little, when life itself was a horror show. There was always the typer to soothe me, to talk to me, to entertain me, to save my ass. Basically, that's why I wrote: to save my ass, to save my ass from the madhouse, from the streets, from myself.

One of my past ladies had screamed at me, "You drink to escape reality!"

"Of course, my dear," I had answered her.

I had the bottle and the typer. I liked a bird in each hand, to hell with the bush.

Anyhow, the screenplay went well. Unlike the novel or the short story or the poem where I would take a night or two off from time to time, I worked on the screenplay each night. And then it was finished.

I phoned Jon. "Well, I don't know what we have but it's finished."

"Great! I'd come to get it but we're having kind of a lunch party down here. Drinks, food, guests. François is the chef. Can you drive the screenplay down?"

"I'd like to but I'm afraid to drive it down there."

"Oh, shit, Hank, nobody is going to steal that old Volks."

"Jon, I just bought a new BMW."

"What?"

"The day before yesterday. My tax accountant says it's tax deductible."

"Tax deductible? That doesn't seem possible…"

"That's what he told me. He said that in America you have to spend your money or they'll take it away. Now they can't take mine away: I don't have any."

"But I've got to see that screenplay! With something to show the producers I can really get going."

"All right, you know the Ralph's Market just outside the ghetto?"

"Yes."

"I'll park in the parking lot and phone you from there. Then you come get me, all right?"

"Good, I'll do it. . ."

Sarah and I were waiting by our black 320i BMW when Jon pulled up. We climbed in and moved toward the ghetto.

"What are your readers and the critics going to say when they find out about the BMW?"

"As always those fuckers will have to judge me on how well I write."

"They don't always do that."

"That's their problem."

"You have the screenplay with you?"

"I've got it right here," said Sarah.

"My secretary."

"He wrote it right out," said Sarah.

"I'm a 320i genius," I said.

We rolled up to Jon's place. A number of automobiles were parked outside. It was still daytime. Maybe about 1:30 p.m. We walked through the house and into the backyard.

The luncheon party had been going on for some time. Empty bottles sat about on wooden tables. Half-eaten watermelon slices looked sad in the sun. The flies lit upon them, then left. The guests looked as if they had been there for at least 3 hours. It was one of those splintered parties: clusters of 3 or 4 people here, ignoring clusters of 3 or 4 people there. There was an admixture of European and Hollywood types plus some others. The others had no special character, they were just there and they were damned determined to stay there. I felt hatred in the air but didn’t know what to do about it. Jon knew: he opened a few fresh bottles of wine.

We walked over to François. He was working the grill. He was slobbering drunk and totally depressed. He was turning chicken parts on the grill. The chicken parts were already done, getting black, but François was still turning them.

François looked terrible. He had on one of those large white chefs hats, only it had evidently fallen from his head several times and there were mud smears on it. He saw us.

“AH! I’VE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU! YOU’RE LATE! WHAT HAPPENED? I CANNOT UNDERSTAND THIS!”

“I’m sorry, François, we had to park at Ralph’s.”

“I HAVE BEEN SAVING SOME CHICKEN FOR YOU! HAVE SOME CHICKEN!”

He gathered two paper plates and flung a bit of chicken upon each.

“Thank you, François.”

Sarah and I found a table and sat down. Jon sat with us.

“François is upset. He thinks I killed one of the chickens. There was no chicken ever born with this man^ legs, breasts and wings. I’ve counted the chickens with him over and over. It’s a full count. But he gets to drinking and he thinks I killed one of the chickens. I got the parts at Ralph’s.”

“François is very sensitive,” said Sarah.

“And how,” said Jon. “And to make things worse, now he prides himself upon guarding us against theft. He has little wires and signals set up everywhere. All types of crazy alarms. Very sensitive. I farted and one of them went off.”

“Come on, Jon…”

“No, it’s true. So, to make matters worse, the other day François went out to start the car. It started. He shifted it into reverse and nothing happened. He thought the reverse gear was finished. He got out of the car and found that the 2 rear wheels were missing…”

“Unbelievable…”

"It happened. The rear of the car was sitting on a pile of rocks and the wheels were missing…"

"They left the front wheels?"

"Yes."

"Where'd you get new wheels and tires?" Sarah asked.

"We bought them back from the crooks."

"What?" I said. "May we have another drink?"

Jon poured.

"They knocked on the door. They said, 'You want your wheels? We have your wheels.' I told them to come in. 'I WILL KILL YOU!' François shouted. I told him to be still. We drank wine with them and haggled over the price. It took much haggling and much wine, but we finally reached an agreement and they brought the wheels and tires in and dumped them on the floor. That was it."

"How much did it cost you?" Sarah asked.

"$33. It seemed a good deal for 2 wheels and 2 tires."

"Not bad," I said.

"Well, actually, it came to $38. We had to pay them $5 to promise not to steal the wheels again."

"But suppose somebody else steals the wheels?"

"They said the $5 would guarantee that nobody would ever touch the wheels. But they said the $5 applied only to the wheels and not to anything else on the car."

"Were there any more agreements?"

"No, then they left. But we noticed that our radio was gone. We had been watching them all the time and yet the radio was gone. I have no idea how they did it. It's a standard size radio. How could they hide it? How did they get it out the door? I don't understand. It is something to be admired."

"Yes."

Jon stood up. He had the screenplay.

"I must now hide this. I have a very special place. And I thank you for your work on this, Hank."

"It was nothing. Easy money."

Jon left with the screenplay. I looked down at my chicken.

"Jesus, I can't eat this…it's burned damn near rock-hard…"

"I can't eat mine either…"

"There's a trash can by the fence there. Let's try to sneak this stuff. . ."

We went over to the trash can. All along the top of the fence were these little eyes looking out of little black faces.

"Hey, let's have some chicken!"

"Give me a wing, motherfucker…"

I walked over to the fence.

"This stuff is burned…nobody can eat it…"

A little hand shot out and the piece of chicken was gone. Another hand shot out and Sarah's piece of burnt chicken was gone also.

The two little guys ran off screaming followed by a bunch of other little guys screaming.

"Sometimes I hate being white," said Sarah.

"There are white ghettos too. And rich blacks."

"It's not comparable."

"No, but I don't know what to do about it."

"Start somewhere…"

"I don't have the guts. I'm too worried about my own white ass. Let's join this jolly group here and have some more to drink."

"That's your answer to everything: drink."

"No, that's my answer to nothing."

It was still splinter-group time. Even in that broken down backyard there were ghetto areas and Malibu areas and Beverly Hills areas. For example, the best-dressed ones with designer clothes hung together. Each type recognized its counterpart and showed no inclination to mix. I was surprised that some of them had been willing to come to a black ghetto in Venice. Chic, they thought, maybe. Of course, what made the whole thing smell was that many of the rich and the famous were actually dumb cunts and bastards. They had simply fallen into a big pay-off somewhere. Or they were enriched by the stupidity of the general public. They usually were talentless, eyeless, soulless, they were walking pieces of dung, but to the public they were god-like, beautiful, and revered. Bad taste creates many more millionaires than good taste. It finally boiled down to a matter of who got the most votes. In the land of the moles a mole was king.

So, who deserved anything? Nobody deserved anything…

François was sitting at a table and we went and sat with him. But he was saddened, completely out of it. He hardly recognized us. A wet and broken cigar was in his mouth and he stared down into his drink. He still had on his dirty chefs hat. He had always had a bit of style even at his worst moments. Now it was all gone. It was terrible.

“WHY WERE YOU LATE? I DO NOT UNDERSTAND! I HELD BACK THE LUNCH AND WAITED FOR YOU! WHY WERE YOU LATE?”

“Look, friend, why don’t you sleep this one off? Tomorrow will look better…”

“TOMORROW ALWAYS LOOKS THE SAME! THAT’S THE PROBLEM!”

Jon walked up.

“I’ll take care of him. He’ll be all right. Come on, let me introduce you to some of the guests.”

“No, we’ve got to go…”

“So soon?”

“Yes, I’m worried about the 320i.”

“I’ll drive you over…”

It was still there. We got in and waved to Jon as he drove off back to the ghetto and the party and poor François.

Soon we were on the freeway.

“Well, you’ve written the screenplay,” said Sarah, “at least there’s that.”

“At least…”

“Do you think it will ever become a movie?”

“It’s about the life of a drunk. Who cares about the life of a drunk?”

“I do. Who would you like to play the lead?”

“François.”

“François?”

“Yes.”

“Do we have anything to drink at home?”

“Half a case of gamay beaujolais.”

“That ought to do it…”

I pushed down on the gas pedal and we moved toward it.

18

Jon got busy. Copies of the screenplay were made, mailed to producers, agents, actors. I went back to fiddling with the poem. I also came up with a new system for the racetrack. The racetrack was important to me because it allowed me to forget that I was supposed to be a writer. Writing was strange. I needed to write, it was like a disease, a drug, a heavy compulsion, yet I didn't like to think of myself as a writer. Maybe I had met too many writers. They took more time disparaging each other than they did doing their work. They were fidgets, gossips, old maids; they bitched and knifed and they were full of vanity. Were these our creators? Was it always thus? Probably so. Maybe writing was a form of bitching. Some just bitched better than others.

Anyhow, the screenplay went around and there weren't any takers. Some said it was interesting but the main complaint was that there wouldn't be an audience for that type of film. It was all right to show how a person who had once been great or unusual was destroyed by drink. But just to focus on a bum drinking or a bunch of bums drinking, that didn't make sense. Who cared? Who cared how they lived or died?

But I did get a phone call from Jon: "Listen, Mack Austin got hold of the screenplay and he likes it. He wants to direct it and he wants the same guy I want to play the lead."

"Who's that?"

"Tom Pell."

"Yeah, he'd make a good drunk..."

"Pell is crazy for the screenplay. He's crazy about your writing, he's read all your stuff. He's so crazy about the screenplay he says he'll do the acting for a dollar."

"Jesus..."

“Only he *insists* that Mack Austin directs. I do not like this Mack Austin. He is my enemy.”

“Why?”

“Oh, we’ve had some problems.”

“Why don’t you guys kiss and make up?”

“NEVER! MACK AUSTIN WILL NEVER DIRECT MY FILM!”

“All right, Jon, then let’s forget it.”

“No, wait, I want to arrange a meeting at your house between Mack Austin, Tom Pell and myself. And you, of course. Maybe you can get Tom Pell to change his mind and do the film without Austin. He’s a great actor, you know.”

“I know. So have them come over. Is he going to bring Ramona?”

“No.”

Tom had married Ramona, the famed pop singer.

“Well, when would be a good time?”

“They’ve agreed to tomorrow night at 8:30 if it’s all right with you.”

“You move fast.”

“In this game you move fast or you die.”

“It’s not like chess?”

“More like a checker game between idiots.”

“One idiot wins?”

“And one idiot loses.”

I found out a little more about the Jon Pinchot and Mack Austin affair. Although Jon had made most of his films in Europe, and Austin’s films were American, the film crowd hung out in the same places in Hollywood. Jon and Mack Austin were in the same fancy eatery. I am not quite sure who was drinking and who wasn’t but it seems that some bickering started between these two directors from tables not too close together. Shoptalk, you know. Technique. Background. Training. Insight, etc.

It went back and forth between the tables before a goodly audience of people in the “industry.”

Finally, Mack rose and shouted at Jon:

"YOU CALL YOURSELF A DIRECTOR? YOU CANT DIRECT TRAFFIC!"

Well, I don't know. Directing traffic is a job that takes great skill.

Anyway, some other people had once accused Mack in public of not being able to direct traffic. Now he was passing on the compliment. All's fair in hate and Hollywood.

I later heard some other half-documented accounts of run-ins between Mack and Jon.

Anyhow, the meeting was on...

INTERIOR. WRITER'S HOME. 8:15 p.m.

Jon had arrived a little early.

"Wait until you see this Austin," he said. "He's off drugs and booze. He's like a flat tire, an empty stocking..."

"I think it's great," said Sarah, "that he has gotten himself cleaned up. That takes courage."

"O.K.," said Jon.

They arrived about 8:35 p.m. Tom in leather jacket. Mack in a calfskin jacket with a leather fringe. He had on a half dozen gold chains. Introductions over, I poured Tom a wine. We hunkered around the coffee table.

Tom started it off.

"I've seen the screenplay. I love it. I want to sink my bicuspids into the fucker. I can taste it already. It's my kind of part."

"Thank you, my man. Yours is the only nibble we've gotten."

"Tom and I even have a backer. We're ready to roll," said Mack.

"You sure you don't want a drink, Mack?" I asked.

"No, thanks."

"I'll get you a soda," said Sarah. "Or would you rather have tea?"

"A soda would be fine."

Sarah went off to get Mack something to make him comfortable. We had health food sodas. The best.

I drank my drink right off, poured another. I was beginning to sense a futility about any sort of compromise or agreement.

"I need Mack for a director. I know his work. I trust him," Tom said.

"You don't trust me?" asked Jon.

"It's not that. It's only that I feel that I could work closer with Mack."

"I am the only one who will direct this movie," said Jon.

"Listen," said Tom, "I know this movie means a lot to you. We can create a position for you. You'll be paid well and you'll be allowed plenty of control. Please accept this. I want this thing to roll. Please try to understand."

Sarah was back with Mack's soda.

"I know that I can work well with Tom," said Mack.

"You can't," Jon began…

"…direct traffic," Mack finished it.

The discussion went on and on. For hours. Sarah, Jon and I kept drinking. Tom kept drinking. And Mack kept working on the health food sodas.

"You're all bullheads," said Sarah. "Surely something can be worked out."

But everything was just as it was in the beginning. Nobody gave way. And I had no ideas. I couldn't break the deadlock.

We even began talking about other things. We told various funny stories in turn. The drinks went round and round.

Toward the end, I don't remember who was telling the story, but it got to Mack Austin. It struck him, health food sodas and all. He fell backwards laughing loudly. His gold chains bounced up and down.

Then he pulled himself together.

Soon after that, it was time to part. Tom and Mack had to leave. We said our goodbyes. After their car backed down the drive Jon looked at me:

"Did you hear that fake laugh? Did you see how those fucking gold chains bounced up and down on his neck? What was he laughing about? Did you see all those fucking gold chains?"

"Yeah, I saw them," I said.

"He was nervous," said Sarah. "He was the only one who wasn't drinking. Have you ever been in a roomful of drunks when you aren't drinking?"

"No," I said.

"Listen," Jon asked me, "can I use your phone?"

"Sure…"

"I must phone Paris! Now!"

"What?"

"Don't worry, I will call collect. I want to talk to my lawyer. It's about an addition to my will…"

"Go ahead."

Jon walked to the phone and began making arrangements for a connection. I walked over and refilled his glass. Then I came back.

"It's awful," said Sarah, "there goes the movie."

"Well, almost something is better than nothing."

"Is it?"

"Come to think of it, I'm not so sure…"

Then Jon had his connection. He'd had more than a few drinks and was excited. He was easily heard:

"PAUL! YES, IT'S JON PINCHOT! YES, IT IS URGENT! I WANT AN ADDITION TO MY WILL! ARE YOU READY? YES, I'LL WAIT!"

Jon looked over at us.

"This is very important…"

Then:

"YES, PAUL! THERE IS THIS MOVIE. I HAVE CONTROL. IT IS CALLED *THE DANCE OF JIM BEAM*, WRITTEN BY HENRY CHINASKI! VERY WELL, GET THIS DOWN! IN CASE OF MY DEATH THIS MOVIE IS NEVER TO BE DIRECTED BY MACK AUSTIN! THIS MOVIE CAN BE DIRECTED BY ANYBODY ON THIS EARTH EXCEPT MACK AUSTIN! DO YOU HAVE THAT, PAUL? YES, THANK YOU VERY MUCH, PAUL. YES, I AM WELL. HOW IS YOUR HEALTH? ALL RIGHT, ANYBODY BUT MACK

AUSTIN! THANK YOU SO MUCH, PAUL! GOODNIGHT, GOODNIGHT!"

After that, we had one more drink together. Then Jon had to go. He stopped at the door.

"Did you hear that fake laugh? Did you see those gold chains bounce?"

"Yes, Jon. . ."

Then he was gone and that night was over. We went out to call the cats. We had 5 cats and we couldn't sleep until all 5 cats were in the house.

The neighbors heard us calling those cats late each night or early in the morning. We had nice neighbors. And those 5 cats each took their damned time coming in.

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3 or 4 days later Jon was on the phone.

"Jack Bledsoe has read the screenplay and he likes it, he wants to act in it. I've been trying to get him to come see you but he claims he doesn't want to be overwhelmed by you. He says you must come see him."

"Will that overwhelm him less?"

"I guess that's what he thinks."

"You think he can play the part?"

"Oh yes, he's from the *streets*! He once sold chestnuts in the streets! He's from New York!"

"I've seen some of his films..."

"Well, what do you think?"

"Maybe...Listen, he's got to stop *smiling* all the time when he doesn't know what else to do. And he's got to stop beating refrigerators with his fists. And he's got to stop that New York strut where they walk like they've got a banana up their ass."

"He used to be a boxer, this Jack Bledsoe..."

"Shit, we all used to be boxers..."

"He can do the part, trust me..."

"Jon, he can't be *New York*. This main character is a California boy. California boys are laid back, in the woodwork. They don't come rushing out, they cool it and figure their next move. Less panic. And under all this, they have the ability to kill. But they don't blow a lot of smoke first."

"You tell him this..."

"All right, when and where?

It was 8 p.m. in North Hollywood. We were about 5 minutes late. We were walking up various dark paths looking for the apartment.

"I hope he has something to drink. We should have brought something."

"I'm sure he'll have something," Sarah said.

It was hard to make out the numbers. Then there was Jon standing on a balcony.

"Up here…"

I went up the stairway and followed Jon. It was one of Jack's little hideaways.

Jon pushed the door open and we walked in. They were sitting on an old couch. Jack Bledsoe and his buddy Lenny Fidelo. Fidelo acted bit parts. Jack Bledsoe looked exactly like Jack Bledsoe. Lenny was a big guy, wide, a little too heavy. He was marked by life, he'd been rubbed in it. I liked him. Big sad eyes. Large hands. Looked tired, lonely, O.K.

Introductions went around.

"Who's this guy?" I asked Jack, nodding at Lenny. "Your bodyguard?"

"Yeah," said Jack.

Jon just stood there smiling as if the thing was a meeting of great souls. But, you never knew.

"Got anything to drink?" I asked.

"All we've got is beer. Beer all right?"

"All right," I said.

Lenny went off into another room for the beer. I was sorry for Sarah, she wasn't nutty for beer.

There were boxing posters all over the wall. I walked around looking at them. Great. Some of them went way back. I began to feel macho just looking at them.

There were springs sticking out of the sofa and there were pillows on the floor, shoes, magazines, paper bags.

"This is a real male hangout," Sarah laughed.

"Yeah, yeah, I like it," I said. "I've lived in some real wrecked places but never anything like this."

"We like it," said Jack.

Lenny was back with the beer. Cans. We cracked them and sat there having a hit or two.

"So, you read the script?" I asked Jack.

"Yeah. Was that guy you?"

"Me, long ago."

"You got your ass kicked," said Lenny.

"Mostly."

"You really ran errands for sandwiches?" Jack asked.

"Mostly."

The beer was good. There was a silence.

"Well, what do you think?" Jon asked.

"You mean Jack?"

"Yes."

"He'll do. We may have to beat him up a bit."

"Lemme see your fighting style," said Jack.

I got up and sparred.

"Quick hands," said Sarah.

I sat down again. "I could take a punch fine. But I lacked a certain desire. I wasn't sure what I was doing. You got another beer?"

"Oh sure," said Lenny, then he got up to get one for me.

It was known in Hollywood that Jack Bledsoe didn't like Tom Pell. He liked to lay it on Tom in almost all his interviews: "Tom comes from Malibu. I come from the streets." It didn't matter to me where an actor came from as long as he could act. Both of them could act. And there was no need for either of them to act the way writers acted.

Lenny was back with the beer.

"It's the last beer," he said.

"Oh shit, no," I said.

"I'll be right back," Jon said.

Then he was out the door. Beer-run. I liked Jon.

"You like this Jon Pinchot as a director?" Jack asked.

"You ever seen his documentary on Lido Mamin?"

"No."

"Pinchot has no fear. He loves fucking with death."

"He's got a hard-on for death, huh?"

"Seems so. But he's done other stuff besides the Mamin film. I trust him as a director all the way. He hasn't been diluted by Hollywood, although some day he might be."

"How about you?"

"How about me, what?"

"Will Hollywood get your balls?"

"No way."

"Famous last words?"

"No,, famous first words."

"Hank hates movies," said Sarah. "The last movie he liked was *The Lost Weekend* and you know how many years ago that was."

"Ray Milland's only bit of acting. But it was aces," I said.

Then I had to piss, asked directions to the crapper.

I went back there, opened the door, went in, did my bit.

Then I turned to the sink to wash my hands.

What the fuck was that?

Pushed down in the sink was this white towel. One end of it was stuffed into the drain and the remainder of it hung out over the sink and dropped to the floor. It didn't look good. And it was soaking wet, just soaked through. What was it for? What did it mean? Left over after some orgy? It didn't make sense to me. I knew it must mean something. I was just an old guy. Was the world passing me by? I'd lived through some shitty nights and days, plenty of them full of anti-meaning, yet I couldn't figure out that giant soaking white towel.

And worse, Jack knew that I was coming by. Why would he leave that thing in there like that? Was it a message?

I walked back out.

Now, if I had been a New Yorker I would have said, "Hey, what's that fucking white dripping towel doing in that fucking sink, huh?"

But I was a California boy. I just walked out and sat down, saying nothing, figuring that what they did was up to them and I didn't want any part of it.

Jon was back with more beer and there was an open can where I was sitting. I went for it. Life was good again.

"I want Francine Bowers for the female lead," said Jack. "I think I can get her."

"I know Francine," said Jon, "I think I can get her too."

"Why don't you both work on it?" Sarah asked.

Lenny went for more beer. He looked like a beer-o. My kind of guy.

"Hey, you think there's a part for me in this movie?" he asked.

I looked at Jon.

"I like Lenny in my flicks," said Jack.

"I think there's a part for you. I promise," said Jon, "we'll work you in."

"I read the script," said Lenny, "I think I could play the part of the bartender."

"Come on," I said, "you wouldn't want to beat up your buddy Jack here, would you?"

"No problem," said Lenny.

"Yeah," said Jack, "he already did it once. Knocked one of my teeth out."

"Really?" Sarah asked.

"And how," said Jack.

We drank the beer. Mostly it was small talk, about the many exploits of Lenny. He'd not only paid his dues, he could recollect them.

When the beer was about gone, I figured it was about time to leave. I made one more bathroom run, then Sarah and I were at the door. Jon was evidently staying behind to talk over something or other.

Then at the door, something strange happened. I asked Jack, "Hey, man, what the fuck is that big sopping wet dripping-ass towel doing hanging out of your bathroom sink?"

"What big sopping wet dripping-ass towel?" Jack asked.

And that was the end of that particular night.

20

3 or 4 weeks went by.

The phone rang one night. It was Jon.

“How are you? How is Sarah?”

“We’re all right. Are you alive?”

“Yes. And so is *The Dance of Jim Beam*. Francine Bowers read the script and loved it. She even took a cut from her usual salary to do it. Jack did too, but don’t tell anybody.”

“No, but why these cuts?”

“We’re dealing with Firepower Productions, Harry Friedman and Nate Fischman. They cut a hard deal but everything’s signed. There was a snag because Jack’s agent demanded a ‘Play or pay’ clause in the contract.”

“What’s that?”

“That means Jack must get paid whether the film is made or not. Most big stars have ‘Play or pay’ in their contracts.”

“It’s hard to believe there’s going to be a movie.”

“Tom Pell had a lot to do with it when he offered to do the thing for a dollar. It gave the project some credibility.”

“I wish we had Tom...”

“Well, he helped. When Jack heard Tom wanted to do it for a dollar, then he got interested. Firepower got interested. We got lucky.”

“You know what Lippy Leo Durocher said?”

“Who’s that?”

“An old-time baseball player. He said, Td rather be lucky than good.’ “

“I think we’re lucky *and* good.”

“Maybe. But who are those Firepower guys?”

“They’re new in Hollywood. They’re outcasts. Nobody knows what to make of them. They used to make exploitation films in Europe. They arrived overnight and began making movies by the score, one after the other. They are hated by everyone. But they deal, although they deal hard."

"At least they took *Jim Beam*."

"Yes, when nobody else would. They have this big building in North Hollywood. I walked into the office and there was Harry Friedman sitting there. 'You got Bledsoe and Bowers?' he asked. 'Yes,' I told him. 'All right,' he said, 'We've got a movie.' 'But don't you want to read the script?' I asked him. 'No,' he said."

"Interesting man."

"Hollywood hates him."

"Too bad..."

"You should see him. A very heavy man. By the way, he's having a birthday party at this place Thursday night. You and Sarah should come. His partner Nate Fischman will be there too."

"We'll be there. Give me the directions..."

Within ten minutes the phone rang again.

"Hank, this is Tim Ruddy, I'm one of the producers of *Jim Beam*."

"You work for Firepower?"

"No, I work with Jon. We are co-producers. Me and Lance Edwards."

"Oh..."

"Anyhow, do you know Victor Norman?"

"I've read his books."

"Well, he's read you too. He's writing and directing a film for Firepower. And he's going to the party. Wants to know if you'll drop off at the Chateau Marmont to meet him, then you can go together."

"What's his suite number...?"

That Thursday we drove up to the Chateau Marmont. The valet took our car and we moved toward the entrance. A smiling, partly bald man was waiting. It was Tim Ruddy. Introductions went around and then we followed him in.

Victor Norman answered our knock. I liked his eyes. He looked calm and knowing.

Introductions. Sarah was looking fine. Norman beamed at her.

I shook hands with him, said, "The barfly meets the champ."

He liked that.

Victor Norman was perhaps the best known novelist in America. He appeared on TV constantly. He was glib and deft with the word. What I liked best about him was that he had no fear of the Feminists. He was one of the last defenders of maleness and balls in the U.S. That took guts. I wasn't always pleased with his literary output but I wasn't always pleased with mine either.

"They gave me the largest suite in the place at a cut-rate. Good advertising, they said. But anyhow Firepower's picking up the tab."

We followed him out on the balcony. A hell of a view of a hell of a town.

It was chilly out there.

"Listen, man," I asked, "don't you have anything to drink around here?"

We followed Victor back into the vast connecting rooms. In there you felt protected from everything. A fortress of security. Nice, nice.

Victor came out holding a bottle of wine.

"I've got some wine but not an opener around..."

"Ah, god," I sighed. An amateur drunk.

Victor Norman was on the phone: "We need an opener. A corkscrew...Some more wine...A few bottles of..."

He looked at us.

It took the wine some time to arrive.

"I'm making two movies for Firepower. I'm writing and directing one. I'm *acting* in the other. Jon-Luc Modard is directing. I hope I can get along with him."

"Good luck," I said.

There was some minor conversation. Then Victor told us how he met Charlie Chaplin. It was a good, wild and funny story.

The wine arrived and we sat down. Sarah and Tim Ruddy got to talking. Sarah sensed that Tim Ruddy was feeling left out and was trying to cheer him up. Sarah was good at that. I wasn't so good at that.

Victor looked at me. "You doing anything now?"

"Fucking with the poem."

Victor looked a touch sad.

"They gave me a million dollars to write my next novel. That was a year ago. I haven't written a page and the money's gone."

"Jesus."

"Jesus won't help."

"I've heard about your alimony, all those x-wives..."

"Yeah."

I moved my glass toward him. It was empty. He refilled it.

"I've heard about your drinking..."

"Yeah."

"What's those things you're smoking?"

"Beedi's. From India. The lepers roll them."

"Really?"

The wine poured and time passed.

"Well, I guess we better head for the party," said Victor Norman.

"We can take my car," I said to Victor.

"O.K."

We went downstairs. Tim Ruddy wanted to take his own car.

The valet brought my car around. I tipped him and Victor and Sarah got in. I pulled out and around and headed for Harry Friedman's birthday party.

"I've got a black BMW too," said Victor Norman.

"Tough guys drive black BMW's," I said.

21

We were a little late for the party but there still weren't very many people there. Victor Norman was seated a few tables away from ours. After Sarah and I were seated the waiter came with our wine. White wine. Well, it was free.

I drained my glass and nodded the waiter over for a refill.

I noticed Victor peering at me.

People were gradually arriving. I saw the famous actor with the perpetual tan. I'd heard that he went to almost every Hollywood party, everywhere.

Then Sarah gave me the elbow. It was Jim Serry, the old drug guru of the 60's. He too went to many of the parties. He looked tired, sad, drained. I felt sorry for him. He went from table to table. Then he was at ours. Sarah gave a delighted laugh. She was a child of the 60's. I shook hands with him.

"Hi, baby," I said.

Quickly it began to get crowded. I didn't know most of the people. I kept waving the waiter in for more wine. He then brought a full bottle, plopped it down.

"When you finish that, I'll bring another."

"Thank you, buster…"

Sarah had wrapped a little present for Harry Friedman. I had it in my lap.

Jon arrived and sat at our table.

"I'm glad you and Sarah could make it," he said. "Look, it's filling up, this place is full of gangsters and killers, the worst!"

Jon loved it. He had some imagination. It helped get him through the days and the nights.

Then a very important looking man walked in. I heard some applause.

I leaped up with the birthday gift. I moved toward him.

"Mr. Friedman, happy…"

Jon rushed up and grabbed me from behind. He pulled me back to the table.

"No! No! That isn't Friedman! That's Fischman!"

"Oh…"

I sat back down.

I noticed Victor Norman staring at me. I figured he would let up in a while. When I looked again, Victor was still staring. He was looking at me as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

"All right, Victor," I said loudly, "so I shit my pants! Want to make a World War out of it?"

He glanced away.

I got up and looked for the men's room.

Coming out I got lost and went into the kitchen. There was a busboy there smoking a cigarette. I reached into my wallet and got a ten. I gave him the ten. I put it in his shirt pocket.

"I can't take this, sir."

"Why not?"

"I just can't."

"Everybody else gets tipped. Why not the busboy? I always wanted to be a busboy."

I walked off, found the main room again and the table.

When I sat down Sarah leaned over and whispered, "Victor Norman came over while you were gone. He says that it's very nice of you that you haven't said anything about his writing."

"I've been good, haven't I, Sarah?"

"Yes."

"Haven't I been a good boy?"

"Yes."

I looked over at Victor Norman, got his attention. I gave a little nod, winked.

Just then the real Harry Friedman walked in. Some rose to their feet and applauded. Others looked bored.

Friedman sat down at his table and the food was served. Pasta. The pasta came around. Harry Friedman got his and went right in. He looked like an eater. He was wide, yes. He was in an old suit, his shoes were scuffed. He had a large head, big cheeks. He shoved that pasta into those cheeks. He had large round eyes and the eyes were sad and full of suspicion. Alas, to live in the world! There was a button missing from his wrinkled white shirt, near his belly, and the belly pushed out. He looked like a big baby who had somehow gotten loose, grown real fast, and almost turned into a man. There was charm there but it could be dangerous to believe in it—it would be used against you. No necktie. Happy birthday, Harry Friedman!

A young lady came in dressed as a cop. She walked right up to Friedman's table.

"YOU ARE UNDER ARREST!" she screamed.

Harry Friedman stopped eating and smiled. His lips were wet from the pasta.

Then the lady cop took off her coat and then her blouse. She had huge breasts. She shook her breasts under Harry Friedman's nose.

"YOU ARE UNDER ARREST!" she screamed.

Everybody applauded. I don't know why they applauded.

Then Friedman motioned the lady cop to bend over. She bent close and he whispered something into her ear. Nobody knew what it was.

You take me to your place. We'll see what happens?

You forgot your club. I'll take care of that?

You come see me. I'll get you in the movies?

The lady cop put her blouse back on, her coat back on, and then she was gone.

People came up to Friedman's table and said little things to him. He looked at them as if he didn't know who they were. Soon he was finished eating and was drinking wine. He did well with the wine. I liked that.

He really went for the wine. After a while he went around from table to table, bending over, talking to people.

"Christ," I said to Sarah, "look at that!"

"What?"

"He's got a little piece of pasta hanging out of one side of his mouth and nobody is telling him about it. It's just *hanging* there!”

“I see it! I see it!” said Jon.

Harry Friedman kept walking from table to table, bending over, talking. Nobody told him.

Finally, he got closer. He was a table or so away from ours when I stood up and walked over to him.

“Mr. Friedman,” I said.

He looked at me from that big monster baby face.

“Yes?”

“Hold still!”

I reached out, got hold of the end of the pasta and yanked. It came away.

“You been walkin’ around with that danglin’. I couldn’t stand it anymore.”

“Thank you,” he said.

I went back to our table.

“Well, well,” asked Jon, “what do you think of him?”

“I think he’s delightful.”

“I told you. I haven’t met anybody like him since Lido Mamin.”

“Anyhow,” said Sarah, “it was nice of you to clean that pasta off his face since nobody else had the nerve to. It was very nice of you.”

“Thank you, I am a very nice guy, really.”

“Oh yes? What else have you done that is nice lately?”

Our wine bottle was empty. I got the attention of the waiter. He scowled at me and moved forward with another bottle.

And I couldn’t think of anything nice that I had done. Lately.

22

Pre-production had begun.

Things seemed to go well.

Then the phone rang. It was Jon.

"We're in trouble..."

"What is it?"

"Friedman and Fischman..."

"Yes?"

"They want to get rid of my co-producers, Tim Ruddy and Lance Edwards..."

"I met Ruddy, not Edwards...What goes?"

"These guys have been working with me a long time on this film. They've put in time and money. Now Friedman and Fischman want to dump them. I'm being pressured from all directions. Everybody has taken a pay cut. And Firepower is in real trouble. The SEC is investigating them. Their stock was up to 40, now it's selling at 4..."

"Uh huh."

" 'Get rid of those guys,' they tell me. 'We don't need them!' 'But,' I tell them, 'I need them...' 'Why do you need them?' they ask me, 'Aren't we as good as they are?' 'But they are in the contract,' I tell them. 'You signed the contract.' 'You know what a contract is?' they ask me and then they tell me, 'A contract only is something to be *renegotiated*!'"

"Jesus..."

"These guys are squeezing and pressuring, squeezing and pressuring .. . And they are going to squeeze until there's nothing left to squeeze...Already I've agreed to shoot the movie in 32 days instead of 34. The budget has been cut again and again...They don't like my sound man...They don't like my cameraman...They want somebody cheaper. 'And you must get rid of these producers,' they tell me, 'we don't need them…'"

“What are you going to do?”

“Well, I can’t abandon Tim and Lance…We have a plan. Tomorrow Tim and I are having lunch with this lawyer. This lawyer is known all over Hollywood. Just the mention of his name puts fear in the hearts of everybody. He is real, total power. And he owes Tim a favor. So, after lunch we are going to drop in on Friedman and Fischman and we are going to have the lawyer with us. Now it would be good if you were there too. Can you?”

“Sure…What’s the time and place?”

Lunch was at Musso’s. We had the big table in the corner. We had drinks and lunch. A number of people stopped by to say a few words to the big lawyer. It was true, they were all in awe of him. The big lawyer was very genteel and he wore a very expensive suit.

The lawyer, Lance and Jon planned their strategy regarding Friedman and Fischman. I didn’t pay much attention. The lawyer laid it out: you say this, I’ll say that. Don’t you say that. Leave it to me.

Lawyers, doctors, plumbers, they made all the money. Writers? Writers starved. Writers suicided. Writers went mad.

Lunch did end and we went to our respective cars and made our way to the big green building where Friedman and Fischman were waiting. We were to meet at the entrance.

The secretary escorted us into Harry Friedman’s office and as we walked in Friedman stood up behind his desk and began right away: “I am sorry but this company has no money and there is nothing that can be done. These other producers must go. We cannot pay them. We have no money!”

We found chairs about the room and sat down.

Jon said, “Mr. Friedman, I need these men, they are essential to the production.”

Friedman remained standing. He put his knuckles down on top of his desk.

"NOBODY IS NEEDED! LEAST OF ALL, THESE MEN. WHAT DO WE NEED THEM FOR? TELL ME, FOR WHAT DO WE NEED THEM?"

"They are my co-producers, Mr. Friedman..."

"I AM A PRODUCER! I AM BETTER THAN THEY ARE! I DO NOT NEED THESE MEN! THESE MEN ARE BLOODSUCKERS! BLOODSUCKERS!"

A door opened behind Friedman's desk and out came Fischman. Fischman was not as heavy as Friedman. He ran in a little circle around Friedman's desk. Fischman moved well. As he ran in his little circle he yelled: "BLOODSUCKERS! BLOODSUCKERS! BLOODSUCKERS!"

Then he ran back through the door, which evidently led to his office.

Friedman sat down behind his desk. It was evident that he knew who the big lawyer was.

He sat behind his desk and said quietly, "We need nobody."

The big lawyer coughed, then spoke: "Please pardon me, but there is...a contract..."

Friedman leaped up from behind his desk: "YOU SHUT UP, YOU WISE-ASS!"

"I will be in touch with you," said the big lawyer.

"YES! YOU BE IN TOUCH! YOU GO AHEAD, BE IN TOUCH, YOU WISE-ASS! YOU ARE NOTHING TO ME!"

We got up and huddled near the door. Some words were whispered back and forth, then Tim and the big lawyer left. Jon said he wanted to talk further with Friedman. I remained.

We sat back down.

"I cannot pay these men," said Friedman.

Jon leaned forward, gestured with a hand. "But, Harry, you just can't ask those men to work for you for...*nothing*!"

"I LOVE it when men work for NOTHING! I LOVE IT!"

"But. . . this is not *right*. . . those men have worked for *months*! You must give them *something*!"

"All right, I'll give them 15 thousand..."

"Only 30 thousand, for all those months of work?"

"No, the 15 thousand is for *both* of them..."

"But this is impossible..."

"Nothing is impossible..."He looked at me: "Who's this guy?"

"He's the writer."

"He's an old guy. He won't live long. I cut him 10 thousand..."

"No, he's paid through me..."

"Then I cut you ten and you cut him ten."

"Harry, stop it, please..."

Friedman got up from his chair and walked over to a leather sofa against the wall. He threw himself fall length upon the sofa. He looked ceilingward. He remained silent. Then there seemed to be a slight sobbing. Liquid was forming in Harry Friedman's eyes.

"We have no money. We have no money. I don't know what to do. Help me, help me!"

He was silent a good two minutes. Jon lit a cigarette and waited.

Then Friedman spoke, still looking up at the ceiling.

"This could be called an Art Film, couldn't it?"

"Well, yes," said Jon.

Harry Friedman leaped up from his couch, ran over to Jon: "AN ART FILM! AN ART FILM! THEN *YOU* WILL WORK FOR NOTHING!"

Jon stood up. "Mr. Friedman, we have to go..."

We moved toward the door.

"Jon," Friedman said, "*those bloodsuckers* will have to go."

"Bloodsuckers," we heard Fischman's voice again from behind the door.

We headed toward the boulevard.

23

Sarah and I decided to visit the ghetto again. Since we still had the old Volks I decided to drive over in that.

Once there, it looked about the same except somebody had left an old mattress in the middle of the street and we had to circle around it.

The whole place had the look of a bombed-out village. On that day there was nobody in sight. It was as if at some signal everybody had gone into hiding. But I could feel a hundred eyes upon us. Or so I imagined.

I parked and Sarah and I got out, knocked on the door. The door had 5 bullet holes in it. Something new.

I knocked again.

“Yes?” I heard Jon’s voice.

“It’s Hank and Sarah. We phoned. We’re here.”

“Oh…”

The door opened. “Come in, please…”

François Racine was at a table with his wine bottle.

“Life is for nothing,” he said.

Jon put the chains on the door. Sarah ran her fingers through the bullet holes.

“I see you’ve had some termites…”

Jon laughed. “Oh, yes…sit down…”

He got some glasses and we sat down. He poured the wine.

“The other day they raped a girl on the hood of my car. There were 5 or 6 of them. We objected. They became very angry. A couple of days went by, then one night we are sitting here and bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, the bullets came through the door. Then it was quiet…”

“We are still alive,” said François. “We sit and drink wine.”

“It is just a ploy,” said Jon. “They want us to move. I refuse to move.”

“Someday we will never be able to move,” said François.

“They have more guns than the police,” said Jon, “and they shoot them more often.”

“You ought to move out of here,” said Sarah.

“Are you kidding? We leased this place for 3 months in advance. We’d lose all the money.”

“Better we lose our lives?” said François taking a big hit.

“Can you sleep at night?” I asked.

“We have to drink to sleep. And then you can never be sure. Those bars on the windows might not mean much. My neighbor has them. The other night he’s eating dinner alone and then there’s a man standing behind him with a gun. Somehow he got in through the roof. There’s some kind of passageway up there. They are under the house and in the roof. They can hear everything we say. They are listening now.”

Four loud taps came up through the floorboards.

“See?”

François jumped up and stamped on the floor.

“BE QUIET! BE QUIET! WHAT KIND OF DEVIL MEN ARE YOU?”

It was silent down there. I guess they just wanted us to know that they were there. They had no desire to get chummy about the whole thing.

François sat back.

“This whole thing is terrifying,” said Sarah.

“I know it,” said Jon. “They stole our TV but we don’t need a TV around here.”

“I thought this was just a black ghetto,” I said, “but I saw some Hispanics last time...”

“Oh yeah,” said Jon, “we have one of the toughest Mexican gangs here, the V-66. To be a member you must have killed somebody.”

There was a long pause.

“How’s the movie going?” I asked, mostly to break the silence.

“Pre-production is rolling. I’m there every day, many hours working with people. We’ll soon be shooting. As each day goes by, as Firepower invests more and more money, the film becomes more of a reality. But there are fuck-ups of every sort every day…”

“Like?” Sarah asked.

“Well, we went to rent a camera…”

“You rent a camera?”

“Yes. So we went to rent a camera and the company said they couldn’t rent it to us.”

“Why?” I asked, walking to the window and looking out to check on the Volks.

“Firepower hadn’t paid for the *last* rental. The company insisted that Firepower furnish them with a certified check for the use of the last camera and for the rental of the one we wanted to use.”

“Did they?” I asked.

“Yes.”

François got up.

“I am going to count the chickens,” he said, then left.

“Isn’t François afraid of this kind of living?” Sarah asked.

“No,” said Jon, “he is crazy. The other day he was sitting here alone and he looked up and there were two guys standing there. One of them had a knife. ‘Give us your money!’ said the guy. ‘No,’ said François, ‘you give me *your* money!’ He was drunk and he got his stick and he started hitting both of them with his stick. They ran out of the house and François chased them down the street beating them with his stick yelling, ‘YOU STAY OUT OF MY HOME! GO TO SOMEBODY ELSE’S HOME! AND DON’T STEAL MY CHICKENS!’ He ran after them all the way down the street.”

“They could have killed him.”

“He’s too crazy to realize that.”

“He’s lucky to be alive,” said Sarah.

“Yes. But I think being French instead of an American helps. It confuses them as they don’t have quite the same hatred as for an American. They sense that he is crazy and not *all* these guys are killers. Some of them are only human and just trying to get by.”

"Aren't they *all* human?" Sarah asked.

"All too human," Jon answered.

François walked in.

"I counted my chickens. They are all still there. I talked to them. I talked to my chickens."

François sat down. Jon filled his glass.

"I want a castle," François said, "I want 6 children and a big fat wife."

"Why do you want all those things?" I asked.

"So when I lose at gambling somebody will talk to me. Now when I lose at gambling nobody talks to me."

I wanted to suggest that when he lost at gambling maybe a fat wife and 6 children might not talk to him either. But I didn't. François was suffering enough.

Instead I said, "We must go to the racetrack together sometime."

"WHEN?" he asked.

"We'll do it soon."

"I have a new system."

"We all have."

Then the phone rang. Jon got it after the 3rd ring.

"Allo..."

"Yes...yes, this is Jon..."

"What? But this can't be!"

He looked at us, still holding the phone.

"He hung up..."

"Who?"

Jon put the phone down. He stood there.

"It was Harry Friedman..."

"And?" I asked.

"And the movie has been cancelled," he answered.

24

Several days passed. I wasn't doing much, just going to the track, coming in and playing with the poem. I worked in 3 areas: the poem, the short story and the novel. Now, it was 4 with the screenplay. Or was it 4? Without the movie was I a screenplay writer? *Jim Beam* wasn't dancing.

Then Jon phoned. "How are the horses?"

"They are all right. Hey, how are you, anyhow?"

"I'm all right...just wanted to let you know what's happening...

"Yes?..."

"Well, after the cancellation, first thing François and I did was to get drunk for two days and nights..."

"A cleansing, right?"

"Yes. So, after that I went down to the Firepower building in an attempt to see Friedman and find out why he cancelled the movie. It was a shocker to me."

"Me too..."

"So, I went down there. The guard wouldn't let me in. Evidently Friedman had given orders for me not to see him."

"Son of a bitch."

"Yes, he is sometimes. Anyhow, I went to the other entrance, there are two entrances..."

"Yes, I know."

"I know the lawyer there. So I told the guard that I wanted to see the lawyer and he let me in. But I didn't go see the lawyer, I went down to Friedman's office and I walked right in there."

"Good..."

"Friedman looked up and saw me. He said, 'Why, hello, Jon, how are you?' I told him that I was fine. I decided not to ask him why he had cancelled the movie. That was his business, anyhow. So I told him, 'Now we are going to get somebody else for this movie.' And he asked, 'Have you gotten anybody else?'

and I told him that I hadn't. Then I said, 'Now we are going to get somebody. And when we do, I want your word on something.' 'Like what?' he asked. 'Well, when we get somebody we are going to have them pay you all your expenses up to date on your pre-production costs.' 'Good,' he said. 'But,' I told him, 'I want your word that you will allow the movie to go forward under those conditions and that Firepower will not ask for additional monies.' 'Fine,' Friedman told me, 'go ahead. Get somebody else. I agree to the terms. And good luck to you.'"

"And that was it?"

"Yes, we shook hands and I left. I believe that he was delighted with the possibility of recovering pre-production costs."

"Now all we gotta do is find somebody."

"We have..."

"What?"

"You see, all the time we have been dealing with Firepower, even after they signed to do the movie we have been secretly seeking other backers. We never quite trusted Firepower. So when one of the other backers found out the movie had been cancelled he jumped right in."

"Oh? Who are these people?"

"It's Edleman, a *big* real estate operator in the east. His west coast man is Sorenson. We've checked everything out. The money is there, it's real. And they say, 'Yes, we have the money. Yes, we want to do the movie. Let's do it.'"

"Are you sure these guys are all right?"

"The money is there. They are established. We are better off than with Firepower. And they love the screenplay and the actors. They are ready to roll. The papers are being drawn up. We sign Thursday afternoon."

"Beautiful, Jon. I'm happy for you. For me too."

"The movie would have been made anyhow. I was determined about that. But now we can do it right away."

"I'm proud of you, Jon."

"I'll keep you up to the moment. Goodbye."

"Do that. Goodbye, Jon..."

The next phone call was a couple of days later.

"Son of a bitch!" Jon said.

"What is it?"

"Firepower has backed down! They know about Edleman and Sorenson. NOW THEY ARE DEMANDING BETWEEN $500,000 AND $750,000 EXTRA!"

"WHAT?"

"Friedman went back on his word. I got him on the phone, I said, 'But you told me you wouldn't ask for anything more! You gave me your word!' "

"What did he say?"

"He didn't say anything. He hung up. Now I can't contact him. He won't take calls from me. I'm going on a HUNGER STRIKE!"

"What?"

"A HUNGER STRIKE! I've got my bottle of water and a little low-back chair and I'm going to sit out in front of Firepower and starve myself!"

"Now?"

"Yes, I'll be down there in ten minutes!"

"You don't mean it..."

"Of course, I mean it!"

When I drove down, there was Jon Pinchot sitting out in front of the building in his little low-back chair. There was the bottle of water. And a crudely made sign:

HUNGER STRIKE!
FIREPOWER IS
LIAR POWER!

I parked and went around to where Jon was. There were 4 or 5 people staring at him. I knelt down by him.

"Look, Jon. Let's forget the fucking film. I'll give you your money back. I don't need it this bad. Let's knock this shit off and go get stinko somewhere, huh?"

Jon reached into his coat pocket and handed me a piece of paper.

"I arranged to have this delivered by messenger to Harry Friedman. He got it. This is a copy." And, he pulled out another paper, "Here is the release agreement."

I read the first paper he had handed me:

> Dear Harry:
>
> Here are the two alternatives I told you on the phone. As you can see they are both acceptable to me. Believe me, when I suggest a solution where I get no money it is not only to save the project but also because *I love you*, much more than you can imagine.
>
> O.K., now you decide. Please do so quickly because I have Edleman who is ready to take over the film and all obligations in all contracts. If Edleman who is ready to take over the film right away does not have this piece of paper (Solution #1 enclosed) signed by you by Thursday afternoon he will not be able to start production on the 19th. Ten important people will have to be hired before then. This leaves us only Tuesday and Wednesday for the takeover of the film by Edleman. If this is not done we will lose Jack Bledsoe as our lead in the film and you will lose around a million dollars. This is suicide for everybody, financially, at any rate. But I must go a step ftirther, as follows: if my movie is not freed by you by tomorrow morning at 9 a.m. like you *promised* me, Solution #2 is that I will start cutting parts off my body and sending them to you in envelopes every day. I am serious. You cannot afford to wait one more day. *It Is a Matter of Life or Death for the Movie.*
>
> love, Jon

The other piece of paper was called Solution #1 and was headed:

AMENDMENT TO LOAN-OUT AGREEMENT
FOR DIRECTING SERVICES OF JON PINCHOT

And having been written by a lawyer was almost unreadable, but it seemed to call for Friedman to release the film to Edleman and to keep the money that was coming to Jon.

I handed the papers back to Jon.

"What is Solution #2?"

"The cutting off of the parts."

"You call that a solution?"

"I guess it should be called a resolution."

"You aren't going to do it?"

"Yes, lam. It's all I know."

"You're crazy."

"No. No. But come with me. I must prepare."

"Prepare?"

"Yes."

We were in Jon's car. "I have the first part I need. The pain-killer. You see I had to go to a doctor for an ingrown toenail. He operated. Then he gave me a pain-killer afterwards. It worked great..."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see. Anyhow, I had to go back to get the toe checked. I said to the doctor, 'That pain-killer was great, it lasted ten hours. Tell me about it.' He told me about it. Then I asked him, 'Can I see it?' And he took me to this medicine cabinet and pointed it out. 'Very interesting,' I said. We talked a bit more, then I left. But I had a bag with me, a small traveling bag. I left it by the medicine cabinet. Then I left the office, came back. 'Oh,' I told the receptionist, 'I left my bag.' I went to get the bag and there was nobody around. I opened the cabinet and took the pain-killer."

"You can't do this," I told Jon.

"I must," he answered.

We were in a hardware store.

"Yes?" the clerk asked.

"I need a saw," Jon said, "an electric chainsaw."

The clerk walked over to a wall display and came back with this orange job.

"This is a Black and Decker, one of our finest."

“Where does the blade go?” asked Jon. “How do you put it in?”

“Oh, it’s quite easy,” said the clerk. He got a blade and fitted it.

Jon looked at it. The blade had very large teeth.

“Umm,” Jon said, “that isn’t quite the blade I was looking for.”

“What kind of blade do you want?” the clerk asked.

Jon thought a moment. Then said, “Something to cut small pieces of wood with. A hard wood.”

“Oh,” said the clerk, “how about this?”

He attached a new blade. It had fine teeth, very close together, sharp.

“Yes,” said Jon, “that’s what I want. That will do.”

“Cash or credit card?” the clerk asked.

Back in the car and driving back to resume the hunger strike I asked Jon, “You’re not really going to do this, are you?”

“Of course, I am going to start with the little finger of the left hand. What good is it anyhow?”

“That’s what you use to hit the ‘a’ key on the typewriter.”

“I’ll type without using ‘a’s.”

“Listen, friend, isn’t there any way to turn this whole thing around and just forget it?”

“No. Not at all.”

“And you’re going to be there at 9 a.m.?”

“In his lawyer’s office. I will plug it in. I will do it unless the film gets released.”

I believed him. It was the way he said it: a simple statement of fact without melodramatic overtones.

“Will you wait for me before you walk into the lawyer’s office?”

“Yes, but you must be on time. Will you be there on time?”

“I’ll be there on time,” I said. We drove back toward Firepower.

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I was there at 8:50 a.m. I parked and waited for Jon. He rolled up at 8:55 a.m. I got out and walked over to Jon's car.

"Good morning, Jon..."

"Hello, Hank...How are you?"

"Fine. Listen, what happened to the hunger strike?"

"Oh, I am still on that. But more important is the cutting off of the parts."

Jon had the Black and Decker with him. It was wrapped in a dark green towel. We walked into the Firepower building together. The elevator took us up to the lawyer's office. Neeli Zutnick. The receptionist was expecting our arrival. "Please go right in," she said.

Neeli Zutnick was waiting. He rose from behind his desk and shook hands with us. Then he returned, sat down behind his desk. "Would you gentleman care for some coffee?" he asked.

"No," said Jon.

"I'll have some," I said.

Zutnick hit the intercom button. "Rose? Rose, my dear...one coffee, please..." He looked at me, "Cream and sugar?"

"Black."

"Black. Thank you, Rose...Now, gentlemen..."

"Where's Friedman?" Jon asked.

"Mr. Friedman has given me full instructions. Now..."

"Where's your plug?" Jon asked.

"Plug?"

"For this..." Jon pulled the towel away revealing the Black and Decker.

"Please, Mr. Pinchot..."

"Where's the plug? Never mind, I see it..."

Jon walked over and plugged the Black and Decker into the wall.

"You must understand," said Zutnick, "that if I had known you were going to bring that instrument I would have arranged to turn off the electricity."

"That's all right," said Jon.

"There's no need for that instrument," said Zutnick.

"I hope not. It's just...in case..."

Rose entered with my coffee. Jon pressed the button on the Black and Decker. The blade sprang into action and began to hum.

Rose nervously tilted the coffee cup just a bit. . . just enough to spill a touch of it on her dress. It was a nice red dress and Rose, a heavy girl, filled it nicely.

"Wow! That *scared* me!"

"I'm sorry," Jon said, "I was just...testing..."

"Who gets the coffee?"

"I do," I told her, "thank you."

Rose brought the coffee over to me. I needed it.

Rose exited, giving us a worried look over her shoulder.

"Both Mr. Friedman and Mr. Fischman have expressed dismay at your present state of mind..."

"Cut the shit, Zutnick! Either I get the release or the first piece of my flesh will be deposited...*there*!"

Jon tapped the center of Zutnick's desk with the end of the Black and Decker.

"Now, Mr. Pinchot, there is no need..."

"THERE IS A NEED! AND YOU'RE RUNNING OUT OF TIME! I WANT THAT RELEASE! NOW!"

Zutnick looked at me. "How is your coffee, Mr. Chinaski?"

Jon squeezed the trigger of the Black and Decker and held up his left hand, little finger extended. He waved the Black and Decker about as the blade furiously worked away.

"NOW!"

"VERY WELL!" yelled Zutnick.

Jon took his finger off the trigger.

Zutnick opened the top drawer of his desk and pulled out two legal-. sized sheets of paper. He slid them toward Jon. Jon walked over, picked them up, sat back down, began reading.

"Mr. Zutnick," I asked, "can I have another cup of coffee?"

Zutnick glared at me, hit the intercom.

"Another cup of coffee, Rose. Black…"

"Like in Black and Decker," I said.

"Mr. Chinaski, that isn't funny."

Jon continued to read.

My coffee arrived.

"Thank you, Rose…"

Jon continued to read as we waited. The Black and Decker lay across his lap.

Then Jon said, "No, this won't do…"

"WHAT?" said Zutnick. "THAT IS A COMPLETE RELEASE!"

"All of clause 'e' must be deleted. It contains too many ambiguities."

"May I see those papers?" asked Zutnick.

"Certainly…"

Jon placed them on the blade of the Black and Decker and passed them over to Zutnick. Zutnick took them off the blade with some disgust. He began reading clause 'e.'

"I see nothing wrong here…"

"Delete it…"

"Do you really intend to cut off one of your fingers?"

"Yes. I may even cut off one of yours."

"Is that a threat? Are you threatening me?"

"Consider this: I have nothing to lose here. Only you have."

"A contract signed under these conditions can be considered invalid."

"You are making me sick, Zutnick! Eliminate clause 'e' or my finger goes! NOW!"

Jon hit the button. The Black and Decker sprang into action again. Jon Pinchot stuck out his little finger, left hand.

"STOP!" screamed Zutnick.

Jon stopped.

Zutnick was on the intercom. "ROSE! I need you…"

Rose entered. "More coffee for the gentleman?"

“No, Rose. I want this entire contract revised and run out again, but eliminate clause ‘e,’ then return it to me.”

“Yes, Mr. Zutnick.”

We all just sat a while then.

Then Zutnick said, “You can unplug that thing now.”

“Not yet,” said Jon. “Not until everything is finalized .

“Do you really have another producer for this thing?”

“Of course…”

“Do you mind telling me who?”

“Of course not. Hal Edleman. Friedman knows that.”

Zutnick blinked. Edleman was money. He knew the name.

“I’ve read the screenplay. It seems very…crude…to me.”

“Have you read any other of Mr. Chinaski’s works?” Jon asked.

“No. But my daughter has. She read his book of stories, *Cesspool Dreams*.”

“And?”

“She hated it.”

Rose was back with the new contract. She handed it to Zutnick. Zutnick gave it a glance, stood up and walked it over to Jon.

Jon reread the whole thing.

“Very well.”

He walked it over to the desk, bent over, signed it. Zutnick signed for Friedman and Fischman. It was done. One copy each.

Then Zutnick laughed. He looked relieved.

“The practice of law gets stranger all the time….”

Jon unplugged the Black and Decker. Zutnick walked to a small cabinet on the wall, opened it, pulled out a bottle, 3 glasses. He sat them on his desk, poured around.

“To the deal, gentlemen…”

“To the deal…” said Jon.

“To the deal,” the writer chimed in.

We drank them down. It was brandy. And we had the movie again.

I walked Jon to his car. He threw the Black and Decker into the back seat, then climbed into the front.

"Jon," I asked from the sidewalk, "can I try you with the big question?"

"Sure."

"You can tell me the truth about the Black and Decker. It will never get further than this. Were you really going to do it?"

"Of course…"

"But the other parts to follow? The other pieces. Were you going to do that?"

"Of course. Once you begin such a thing there is no stopping."

"You've got guts, my man…"

"It is nothing. Now I am hungry."

"Can I buy you breakfast?"

"Well, all right…I know just the place…Get into your car and follow me…"

"All right."

I followed Jon through Hollywood, the light and the shadows of Alfred Hitchcock, Laurel and Hardy, Clark Gable, Gloria Swanson, Mickey Mouse and Humphrey Bogart, falling all around us.

26

There wasn't much for a week or so. I was playing with one of the cats on the rug when the phone rang. Sarah got it.

"Yes? Oh, hello Jon. Yes, he's here. There's no racing on Mondays or Tuesdays. What? Oh god, what a mess…Look, I'll get Hank…"

I got up off the rug and took the phone.

"Hello, Jon…"

"Hank, it fell through…"

"What?"

"The Edleman thing. They were going around trying to sell *The Dance of Jim Beam* for 7 million behind our back. The people I had hired to go around secretly to find another backer when we were with Firepower have just told me that the Edleman group offered to sell them the rights to the movie for 7 million."

"But they don't have the rights, yet…"

"They claimed that they did. They presented the package: the screenplay, the actors, the budget. For the right to produce the film they were asking 7 million. They were going to buy the rights from us for less after they had made a deal in secret…"

"Jesus…"

"We are once again the victim of another bunch of crooks. So that's out. The Edleman thing is finished. So we are now going to try to get another producer. I didn't want to bother you with all this but I thought I'd better let you know."

"Of course. So, how's it going?"

"We get people on the phone. We present it to them on the phone and they all say, 'Fine, fine, we'll do it.' Then when they see the screenplay they say, 'No.' The whole town says, 'No.' The moment they see the screenplay they say, 'No.' Here's a film with 2 great actors and a budget so low that there is no way this film isn't going to make money. Yet the whole town says 'No.' It's unheard of."

"They don't like the screenplay," I said.

"They don't like it."

"And I don't like them. I don't like them at all."

"Well, we are going to keep working. There must be some people somewhere that we haven't tried."

"It sounds dark."

"Somehow we are going to do this thing."

"I like your faith."

"Don't worry."

"All right…"

I got back down on the rug and played with the cat. The cat liked to chase this piece of string.

"The movie's back to nowhere," I told Sarah. "Nobody likes the screenplay."

"Do you like it?"

"I think it's better than most of the screenplays I've seen but maybe I'm wrong. Mostly I'm sorry for Jon."

The cat missed the string but sunk a claw into the top of my hand. The blood came. I walked to the bathroom and doused the wound with hydrogen peroxide. There was my face in the mirror: just an old man who had written a screenplay. Shit. I walked out of there.

When the horses were running I never got any bad news because I wasn't home and nobody could find me.

Well, the track did come around again and I went every day, did all right, came in, as was my wont, ate, watched a bit of TV with Sarah, went upstairs to the wine bottle and the typer. I was working on the poem. There wasn't much money in the poem but it sure was a big playground to flounder around in.

Within a couple of weeks after his last phone call there was another from Jon.

"Everything is hell again," he said. "We are worse off than ever!"

"What?"

"Listen, we found a producer, he said all right, he liked everything, even the screenplay. He told me, 'AH right, we'll do it. Bring the papers, I'll sign them and we'll get right into production.' So a time was set for the signing but before I could get over there he phoned me. He said, 'I can't do the film.' Apparently there is a well-known director who claims he has the dramatic rights to all the works about Henry Chinaski. 'There is nothing I can do,' he told me. The deal is off.'"

Henry Chinaski was the name Ihad used for my main character in my various novels. I had used the name again in the screenplay.

"What is this bullshit?" I asked.

"It's not bullshit. You have sold the rights to the Henry Chinaski character."

"There's no truth in this," I said, "but even if it were true, all we would have to do is to change the name."

"No, the contract says that he owns the *character* no matter what name you use. Forever!"

"This can't be true..."

"I am afraid when you sold your novel *Shipping Clerk* to the director Hector Blackford, you also sold those dramatic rights."

"Yes, I sold the movie rights. It was only 2 thousand dollars. I was starving. It looked like a lot of money to me at the time. Blackford never made a movie out of *Shipping Clerk*."

"It doesn't matter. It says in the contract that he owns the character forever."

"Listen, how did you hear all this?"

"Well, there's this lawyer, Fletcher Jaystone. He's in bed with a lady film editor. They've completed their business and the lawyer sees the screenplay on the side table. He reaches over. It's *The Dance of Jim Beam*. He flips through it, puts the screenplay back down and says, 'HENRY CHINASKI! MY CLIENT OWNS THIS GUY! I DREW UP THE CONTRACT MYSELF!' And right from there the word goes around town. *The Dance of Jim*

Beam is dead. Now nobody will touch it because Blackford and his lawyer own Henry Chinaski."

"That's not true, Jon. I wouldn't sell these rights into perpetuity for a lousy 2 grand. That wouldn't make any sense."

"But it's in the contract!"

"I read the contract before I signed it. I never saw anything like that."

"See section VI."

"I don't believe it."

"I phoned this lawyer. He is a tough guy. 'We own Henry Chinaski,' he told me. 'I invested 15 thousand of my own money at the time and it was lot of money then. It's *still* a lot of money.' I started to get excited, I started to scream at him. 'Wait,' he said, 'don't talk to me like that. Don't you talk to me like that.' I couldn't get anywhere with him. I don't know if he wants a lot of money or what but right now *Jim Beam* is dead, deader than anything around. It's finished."

"Jon, I'll phone you back."

I looked up the contract and checked section VI. To my mind I could see no implied or direct sale of the rights to the character. I read section VI again and again but couldn't see it.

I phoned Jon.

"There's nothing in section VI that says anything about handing over the character forever. What kind of sickness is this? Has everybody gone crazy?"

"No; but that's what it means."

"What means?"

"Section VI."

"Do you have the contract there, Jon?"

"Yes."

"Will you read me where it states that this guy owns Henry Chinaski."

"Well, it infers it."

"This is SICK! I don't even see an *inference*!"

"If we have to go to court it will take 3,4,5 years…And meanwhile, *Jim Beam* will be dead. Nobody will touch it!"

"IS EVERYBODY IN THIS TOWN THAT FRIGHTENED? THERE IS NOTHING IN SECTION VI THAT STATES ANYTHING IN THE VAGUEST WAY ABOUT SELLING THE CHINASKI CHARACTER TO THESE PEOPLE!"

"You have signed away the rights to Henry Chinaski forever," said Jon.

He was sick too. I hung up.

I found Hector Blackford's phone number. It was listed in the phone book as it had always been. I had known Hector since he had come out of filmmaking school at USC. One of his first films had been a documentary about me. It played on PBS one night. The next morning 50 people phoned in and cancelled their subscriptions.

Hector and I had been drunk together a few times. He had shown some interest in doing *Shipping Clerk* and he had even handed me a screenplay but it was so badly done that I told him to forget it. Meanwhile, he went his way and I went mine. And he became rich and famous, directing a number of big hits. I played with the poem and forgot about *Shipping Clerk*.

The phone rang and he was there.

"Hector, this is Hank..."

"Oh, hello Hank. How's it going?"

"Not well."

"What is it?"

"It's about *Jim Beam*. There's a guy going around town who claims you and he own Henry Chinaski. You know him."

"Fletcher Jaystone?"

"Yes. Now, Hector, you know I wouldn't sell my ass and soul for a lousy 2 thousand bucks."

"Fletcher says that you have..."

"It's not in section VI."

"He says it is."

"Have you read it?"

"Yes."

"Is it?"

"I don't know."

"Listen, baby, you're not going to yank my balls off because of some vague wordage that nobody can understand, are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we've got a movie under way and this is going to kill it off forever. Don't you remember all those nights we got drunk together and talked all that good talk?"

"Yes, those were good nights."

"Then talk to your man and get him off our ass. We only want to inhale and exhale. That's all."

"Hank, I'll call you back."

I sat by the phone and waited. I waited 15 minutes. It rang.

It was Hector. "All right, Jaystone is going to relent."

"Thank you, man, I know you've got a good heart. The business hasn't killed you yet."

"Jaystone is going to send you a release, immediately."

"Great! Great! Hector, you're beautiful!"

"And Hank..."

"Yes?"

"I'm still going to make a movie out of *Shipping Clerk* someday."

"All right, baby! Hello to your wife!"

"Hello to Sarah," said Hector.

Nine-tenths of this kind of action is resolved over the telephone; the other tenth is the signing of the papers.

I phoned Jon.

"Hector is calling your man Jaystone off. Jaystone is sending a release."

"Great! Great! Now we can go ahead! Hector was your buddy, wasn't he?"

"Well, I think he's proved that."

"As soon as we get the release I'll go back to our new producer...By the way, instead of waiting on the mail why don't I just go to Jaystone's office and pick up the release?"

"Sure, phone him and set it up."

“Well, we’re back in the movie business,” said Jon.

“Sure. Maybe we ought to have lunch at Musso’s.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow. One-thirty.”

“See you there,” said Jon.

“See you,” I answered.

27

So there I was sitting around typing up poems and sending them out to the little magazines. For some reason the short story wasn't arriving on the typer and I didn't like that but I couldn't force it, so there I was playing with the poem. It was my release and my feast. Maybe the short story would come back some day. I certainly hoped so. The horses ran, the wine still poured and Sarah did some beautiful work in the garden.

I didn't hear from Jon for about a week, then one night the phone rang.

"You know that new producer we got the release from Blackford for?"

"Yes, is he ready to go?"

"He's backed out. Says he doesn't want to do the film."

"Why?"

"He said that while he was waiting for the release papers he was offered another property he preferred. A screenplay about twin orphans who become the Doubles Champions of the Tennis World."

"Sounds great. Wish I had thought of that."

"But there's some good news too."

"Like?"

"Firepower has decided to go ahead with the movie."

"What? *Why*?"

"I think they got scared that somebody else was going to do it. I think they smell money there. After all, the budget is pared to the bone. Everybody took a cut. And that was their doing, their artwork. I don't think they wanted anybody else to benefit from that. Harry Friedman phoned me. 'I want that god damned movie,' he said. 'All right,' I told him, 'you've got it.'

‘And if this movie doesn’t make money, I will personally cut off *all* of your fingers!’”

“So, it’s on again…?”

“It’s on again.”

Then three or four nights later the phone rang. It was Jon.

“All right if I come over? There is something we must talk about.”

“Sure, Jon…”

Thirty minutes later he was at the door. The bottle and the glasses waited on the coffeetable.

“Come on in, Jon…”

“Where’s Sarah?”

“Acting class.”

“Oh…”

Jon walked around and found his favorite seat near the fireplace. I filled his glass.

“AH right, tell me.”

“Well, we are all set to start shooting, the schedule is set. Then Francine Bowers, she’s in Boston, she falls ill. There must be an operation. She won’t be ready for two weeks…”

“What happens?”

“We shoot around her. We shoot Jack Bledsoe, everything else. We will shoot her last. We get set to shoot the first scene with Jack and he refuses!”

“Why?”

“He demands a Rolls-Royce convertible to bring him to the set before he will do any acting.”

“How the hell can he do that?”

“It’s in his contract. We find him one. No good. It’s the wrong color. We shoot some scenes without Jack or Francine. Then we find the right color Rolls convertible and Jack is back and ready to go to work.”

I refill the drinks.

“He I wants you down there watching him,” said Jon.

“What? Doesn’t he know that I have to go to the racetrack?”

"He says that they don't run every day."

"That's true."

"Listen, Hank, he wants you to write a scene just for him."

"Oh yeah?"

"He wants to do a scene in front of a mirror, he wants to say something in front of a mirror. Maybe a poem..."

"That could ruin everything, Jon."

"These actors can be very difficult. If they get unhappy in the beginning, they can kill the whole film."

Here I go, I thought, selling my ass down the river...

"All right," I said, "I'll write a poem in the mirror."

"Also, Francine wants a scene where she can show off her legs. She has great legs, you know."

"All right, I'll write in a leg scene..."

"Thank you. You know, you have another payment coming. You were supposed to get it when the shooting started but Firepower has held off paying us. But we'll get it and when we do you'll be paid."

"All right, Jon."

"I wish you'd come down and see the bar and the hotel where we're shooting. We're using real barflies, you know. They live in that hotel. You'll like them."

"We'll be down there Monday..."

"I had some other little problems with Jack..."

"Like?"

"He wanted to get a tan, wear a little fedora and a pigtail..."

"I don't believe that..."

"It's true. It took me hours to talk him out of it. And look what he wanted to wear in the movie!"

Jon reached down into his briefcase and pulled out a pair of dark shades. He put them on. They were huge. And the frame was shaped into green plastic palm trees.

"Is this guy crazy?" I asked. "There isn't a man in the state of California who'd wear those things."

"I told him that. He insisted that he be allowed to wear the glasses *somewhere* in the movie, if only for a moment.

‘OTHERWISE,’ he screamed at me, ‘YOU’LL BE TAKING MY BALLS AWAY!’ “

“Well,” I said, “I don’t want to take his balls away. I’ll figure out a scene somewhere where he can put the glasses on.”

“You’ll get this stuff to me as soon as you write it?”

“I’ll do it tonight.”

I poured another round of drinks.

“How’s François?”

“You know that 60 thousand he got behind on that practice roulette wheel?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he worked his way out of that. He’s now six thousand ahead and a much happier man.”

“Good.”

Three things a man needed: faith, practice, and luck.

28

The shooting was to start in Culver City. The bar was there and the hotel with my room. The next part of the shooting was to be done in the Alvarado Street district, where the apartment of the female lead was located.

Then there was a bar to be used near 6th Street and Vermont. But the first shots were to be in Culver City.

Jon took us up to see the hotel. It looked authentic. The barflies lived there. The bar was downstairs. We stood and looked at it.

"How do you like it?" Jon asked.

"It's great. But I've lived in worse places."

"I know," said Sarah, "I've seen them."

Then we walked up to the room.

"Here it is. Look familiar?"

It was painted grey as so many of those places were. The torn shades. The table and the chair. The refrigerator thick with coats of dirt. And the poor sagging bed.

"It's perfect, Jon. It's *the* room."

I was a little sad that I wasn't young and doing it all over again, drinking and fighting and playing with words. When you're young you can really take a battering. Food didn't matter. What mattered was drinking and sitting at the machine. I must have been crazy but there are many kinds of crazy and some are quite delightful. I starved so that I could have time to write. That just isn't done much anymore.

Looking at that table I saw myself sitting there again. I'd been crazy and I knew it and I didn't care.

"Let's go down and check the bar again…"

We went down. The barflies who were to be in the movie were sitting there. They were drinking.

"Come on, Sarah, let's grab a stool. See you later, Jon…"

The bartender introduced us to the barflies. There was Big Monster and Little Monster, The Creeper, Buffo, Doghead, Lady Lila, Freestroke, Clara and others.

Sarah asked The Creeper what he was drinking. “It looks good,” she said.

“This is a Cape Cod, cranberry juice and vodka.”

“I’ll have a Cape Cod,” Sarah told the barkeep, Cowboy Cal.

“Vodka 7,” I told the Cowboy.

We had a few. Big Monster told me a story about how they had all got in a fight with the cops. Quite interesting. And I knew by the way he told it that it was the truth.

Then there was lunch call for the actors and crew. The barflies just stayed in there.

“We’d better eat,” said Sarah.

We went out behind and to the east of the hotel. A large bench was set up. The extras, technicians, hands and so forth were already eating. The food looked good. Jon met us out there. We got our servings at the wagon and followed Jon down to the end of the table. As we walked along, Jon paused. There was a man eating by himself. Jon introduced us.

“This is Lance Edwards...”

Edwards gave a slight nod and went back to his steak.

We sat down at the end of the table. Edwards was one of the co-producers.

“This Edwards acts like a prick,” I said.

“Oh,” said Jon, “he’s very bashful. He’s one of the guys that Friedman was trying to get rid of.”

“Maybe Friedman was right.”

“Hank,” said Sarah, “you don’t even know the man.”

I was working at my beer.

“Eat your food,” said Sarah.

Sarah was going to add ten years to my life, for better or worse.

“We are going to shoot a scene with Jack in the room. You ought to come watch it.”

"After we finish eating we're going back to the bar. When you're ready to shoot, have somebody come get us."

"All right," said Jon.

After we ate we walked around the other side of the hotel, checking it out. Jon was with us. There were several trailers parked along the street. We saw Jack's Rolls-Royce. And next to it was a large silver trailer. There was a sign on the door: JACK BLEDSOE.

"Look," said Jon, "he has a periscope sticking out of the roof so he can see who's coming..."

"Jesus..."

"Listen, I've got to set things up..."

"All right...See you..."

Funny thing about Jon. His French accent was slipping away as he spoke only English here in America. It was a little sad.

Then the door of Jack's trailer opened. It was Jack.

"Hey, come on in!"

We went up the steps. There was a TV on. A young girl was lying in a bunk watching the TV.

"This is Cleo. I bought her a bike. We ride together."

There was a fellow sitting at the end.

"This is my brother, Doug..."

I moved toward Doug, did a little shadow boxing in front of him. He didn't say anything. He just stared. Cool number. Good. I liked cool numbers.

"Got anything to drink?" I asked Jack.

"Sure..."

Jack found some whiskey, poured me a whiskey and water.

"Thanks..."

"You care for some?" he asked Sarah.

"Thanks," she said, "I don't like to mix drinks."

"She's on Cape Cods," I said.

"Oh..."

Sarah and I sat down. The whiskey was good. "I like this place," I said. "Stay as long as you like," said Jack. "Maybe we'll stay forever…" Jack gave me his famous smile. "Your brother doesn't say much, does he?"

"No, he doesn't."

"A cool number."

"Yeah."

"Well, Jack, you memorized your lines?"

"I never look at my lines until right before the shooting."

"Great. Well, listen, we've got to be going."

"I know you can do it, Jack," said Sarah, "we're glad you got the lead."

"Thanks…"

Back at the bar the barflies were still there and they didn't look any drunker. It took a lot to buzz a pro.

Sarah had another Cape Cod. I went back to the Vodka 7.

We drank and there were more stories. I even told one. Maybe an hour went by. Then I looked up and there was Jack standing looking over the swinging doors in the entrance. I could just see his head.

"Hey, Jack," I yelled, "come on in and have a drink!"

"No, Hank, we're going to shoot now. Why don't you come up and watch?"

"Be right there, baby…"

We ordered up another pair of drinks. We were working on them when Jon walked in.

"We're going to shoot now," he said.

"All right," said Sarah.

"All right," I said.

We finished our drinks and I got a couple of bottles of beer to take with us.

We followed Jon up the stairway and into the room. Cables everywhere. Technicians were moving about.

"I'll bet they could shoot a movie with about one-third of these flicking people."

"That's what Friedman says."

"Friedman is sometimes right."

“All right,” said Jon, “we’re just about ready. We’ve had a few dry runs. Now we shoot. You,” he said to me, “stand in this corner. You can watch from here and not be in the scene.”

Sarah moved back there with me.

“SILENCE!” screamed Jon’s assistant director, “WE’RE GETTING READY TO ROLL!”

It became very quiet.

Then from Jon: “CAMERA! ACTION!”

The door to the room opened and Jack Bledsoe weaved in. Shit, it was the young Chinaski! It was me! I felt a tender aching within me. Youth, you son of a bitch, where did you go?

I wanted to be the young drunk again. I wanted to be Jack Bledsoe. But I was just the old guy in the corner, sucking on a beer.

Bledsoe weaved to the window by the table. He pulled up the tattered shade. He did a little shadow boxing, a smile on his face. Then he sat down at the table, found a pencil and a piece of paper. He sat there a while, then pulled the cork from a wine bottle, had a hit, lit a cigarette. He turned on the radio and lucked into Mozart.

He began writing on that piece of paper with the pencil as the scene faded…

He had it. He had it the way it was, whether it meant anything or not, he had it the way it was.

I walked up to Jack, shook his hand.

“Did I get it?” he asked.

“You got it,” I said…

Down at the bar, the barflies were still at it and they looked about the same.

Sarah went back to her Cape Cods and I went the Vodka 7 route. We heard more stories which were very very good. But there was a sadness in the air because after the movie was shot the bar and hotel were going to be torn down to further some commercial purpose. Some of the regulars had lived in the hotel for decades. Others lived in a deserted train station nearby and action was being taken to remove them from there. So it was heavy sad drinking.

Sarah said finally, “We’ve got to get home and feed the cats.”

Drinking could wait.

Hollywood could wait.

The cats could not wait.

I agreed.

We said our goodbyes to the barflies and made it to the car. I wasn’t worried about driving. Something about seeing young Chinaski in that old hotel room had steadied me. Son of a bitch, I had been a hell of a young bull. Really a top-notch fuck-up.

Sarah was worried about the future of the barflies. I didn’t like it either. On the other hand I couldn’t see them sitting around our front room, drinking and telling their stories. Sometimes charm lessens when it gets too close to reality. And how many brothers can you keep?

I drove on in. We got there.

The cats were waiting.

Sarah got down and cleaned their bowls and I opened the cans.

Simplicity, that’s what was needed.

We went upstairs, washed, changed, made ready for bed.

“What are those poor people going to do?” asked Sarah.

“I know. I know…”

Then it was time for sleep. I went downstairs for a last look, came back up. Sarah was asleep. I turned out the light. We slept. Having seen the movie made that afternoon we were now somehow different, we would never think or talk quite the same. We now knew something more but what it was seemed very vague and even perhaps a bit disagreeable.

29

Jon Pinchot had escaped from the ghetto. In his contract it stated that he would be supplied with an apartment to be paid for by Firepower. Jon found an apartment near the Firepower building. Each night, from his bed, Jon could see the lit sign at the top of the building, Firepower, and it shone through his window and upon his face as he slept.

François Racine remained in the ghetto. He began a garden, growing vegetables. He spun his roulette wheel, tended his garden and fed the chickens. He was one of the strangest men I had ever met.

“I cannot leave my chickens,” he told me. “I will die in this strange land here with my chickens, here among the blacks.”

I went to the track on the days that the horses were running and the movie continued shooting.

The phone rang every day. People wanted to interview the writer. I never realized that there were so many movie magazines or magazines interested in the movies. It was a sickness: this great interest in a medium that relentlessly and consistently failed, time after time after time, to produce anything at all. People became so used to seeing shit on film that they no longer realized it was shit.

The racetrack was another waste of human life and effort. The people marched up to the windows with their money which they exchanged for pieces of numbered paper. Almost all of the numbers weren’t good. In addition the track and the state took 18% off the top of each dollar, which they roughly divided. The biggest damn fools went to the movies and the racetracks. I was a damn fool who went to the racetrack. But I did better than most because after decades of race-going I had learned a minor trick or two. With me, it was a hobby and I never went wild with my money. Once you have been poor a long time you gain a certain respect for money. You never again want to be without any of it at all. That's for saints and fools. One of my successes in life was that in spite of all the crazy things I had done, I was perfectly normal: I chose to do those things, they didn't choose me.

Anyhow, one night the phone rang. It was Jon Pinchot.

"I don't know what to do," he said.

"Did Friedman cancel the movie again?"

"No, it's not that...I don't know how this guy got my phone number..."

"What guy?"

"He just phoned me..."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'YOU MOTHERFUCKER, YOU KILLED MY BROTHER! YOU KILLED MY BROTHER! NOW I AM COMING TO KILL YOU! I AM COMING TO KILL YOU TONIGHT!'"

"God..."

"He was sobbing, he seemed out of his mind, it seemed very real. Maybe it is. In this town, you never know..."

"Did you phone the police?"

"Yes."

"What did they say?"

"They said, 'Call us when he gets there.'"

"You can stay over here..."

"No, thanks, it's all right...but I'm sure I won't sleep well tonight..."

"Do you have a gun?"

"No, tomorrow I will get one, but then it may be too late."

"Go to a motel..."

"No, he may be watching..."

"What can I do?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to let you know and to thank you for writing the screenplay."

"It's all right."

"Goodnight, Hank..."

"Goodnight, Jon..."

He hung up.

I knew how he felt. A guy phoned me once and told me he was going to kill me because I had fucked his wife. He called me by my last name and told me he was on the way over. He didn't make it. He must have been killed in a traffic accident.

I decided to phone François Racine to see how he was doing.

I got his answering machine:

"DO NOT SPEAK TO ME, SPEAK TO THIS MACHINE. I DO NOT WISH TO SPEAK. SPEAK TO THIS MACHINE. I AM NOWHERE AND YOU ARE ALSO NOWHERE. DEATH COMES WITH HIS LITTLE HANDS TO GRIP US. I DO NOT WISH TO SPEAK. SPEAK TO THE MACHINE."

The beep sounded.

"François, you fuck-head..."

"Oh, it's you, Hank..."

"Yeah, babe..."

"There has been a fire...a fire...FIRE..."

"What?"

"Yes, I buy this cheap black and white TV...I leave it on while I am going somewhere...I want to fool them...Make them think there is somebody inside...I guess while I was gone the TV caught on fire or exploded...When I drive up I see all the smoke...The fire department does not come down here...This whole block could be in flames, they would not come...I walk through the smoke...There are flames...The blacks are in there...The killers and the thieves...They have buckets of water and they are running back and forth putting out the fire...I sit and watch...I find a bottle of wine, open it, drink...The blacks are running about. . . Soon the fire is out...There are embers and much smoke. We cough. 'Sorry, man,' one of the blacks says. 'We got here late. We were having a gang meeting...somebody smelled smoke...' 'Thank you,' I told them. One of them had a pint of gin, we passed it around, then they left..."

"I'm sorry, François...Christ, I don't know what to say...Is it still liveable there?"

"I sit in the smoke, I sit in the smoke...It is like a fog, a fog...Now my hair is white, I am an old man, I sit in the fog...There is fog everywhere and my hair is white...I am an old man, I sit in the fog...Now I am a young boy, I sit in the fog...I hear my mother's voice...Oh no! She is moaning! She is getting FUCKED! She is getting FUCKED by somebody terrible! I must go back to France, I must help my mother, I must help France!"

"François, you can stay here…or I'm sure Jon has room...It's not as bad as you think...Every dark cloud passes..."

"No, no, sometimes there is a dark cloud that never passes. It stays forever!"

"Well, that's death."

"Each day in life is death! I go back to France! I act again!"

"François, how about the chickens? You love the chickens, remember?"

"Fuck the chickens! Let the blacks have the chickens! Let the black meat and the white meat meet!"

"Meat meet?" I asked.

"I am in the fog. There has been a fire. A fire. I am an old man, my hair is white. I sit in the fog...I go now..."

François hung up.

I tried him again. All I got was: "DO NOT SPEAK TO ME, SPEAK TO THIS MACHINE..."

I hoped he had a bottle or two of good red wine to get him through the night because it appeared if ever a man needed that it was my friend, François. Unless it was my friend, Jon. Unless it was me. I opened one.

"Care for a glass or two?" I asked Sarah.

"Certainly," she answered. "What's new?"

I told her.

30

The man didn't come to kill Jon the first night. On the second night Jon had a gun and waited. The man didn't come. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't.

Meanwhile, Francine Bowers had recovered from her operation.

"$50 per diem, plus room and board, that's all I can give her," Friedman told Jon.

There was also some argument about paying for her flight to California but Firepower finally agreed to do it.

I was to receive a payment upon the first day of shooting and so was Jon but nothing had occurred. Firepower was to pay Jon and then Jon was to pay me. There had been nothing. I had no idea if the other people in the crew were being paid.

Maybe that's why I decided to go to the Distributor's Party. I could ask Friedman where my money was.

The party was on a Friday night at the Lemon Duck, a large dark place with a big bar and many tables. When Sarah and I arrived, most of the tables were filled. These people were the distributors from all over the world. They looked calm and almost bored. They were eating or ordering their meals, not saying much, not drinking much. We found a table off to the corner.

Jon Pinchot walked in and spotted us right away. He came to the table, smiling. "Surprised to find you here. Distributor's parties are horrible...By the way, I have something..."

He had the screenplay there in its blue cover and he opened it.

"Now, this scene here, we need to cut a minute and a half. Can you do it?"

"Sure. But listen, could you get Sarah and me a drink?"

"Of course. . ."

"Jon is right," said Sarah, "this party doesn't seem to have much life."

"Maybe we can add something to it," I said.

"Hank, we don't have to always be the last ones to leave a party."

"But somehow, we are…"

I began crossing out lines. My people talked too much. Everybody talked too much.

Jon was back with the drinks.

"How's it going?"

"My people talk too much…"

"They drink too much…"

"No, they can't drink too much. There is never enough…"

Then there was applause.

"It's Friedman," said Sarah.

Here he came in an old suit, no necktie, top button missing from his shirt and the shirt was wrinkled. Friedman had his mind on other things besides dress. But he had a fascinating smile and his eyes looked right at people as if he were x-raying them. He had come from hell and he was still in hell and he'd put you in hell too if you gave him the slightest chance. He went from table to table, dropping small and precise sentences.

Then he came to our table. He made some remark on how nice Sarah looked.

"Look," I pointed to the screenplay on the table, "this son of a bitch Pinchot has me WORKING during this party!"

"GOOD!" said Friedman, then turned and walked off toward another table.

I finished the cuts and handed the screenplay to Jon. He read it.

"It's fine," he said, "nothing important is left out and I think it reads just as well."

"Maybe better."

Then there was more applause. Francine Bowers was making her entrance. She wasn't that old but she was from the old school. She stood very straight (straight as in regal) turning her head slowly to the right and then to the left, smiling, then not smiling, then smiling again. She hesitated and stood there. She stood like a statue for ten seconds, then moved forward gracefully into the room. This earned her more applause. A few flashbulbs popped. Then she relaxed. She stopped at some of the tables for a word or two, then moved on.

God, I thought, what about the writer? The writer was the blood and bones and brains (or lack of same) in these creatures. The writer made their hearts beat, gave them words to speak, made them live or die, anything he wanted. And where was the writer? Who ever photographed the writer? Who applauded? But just as well and damn sure just as well: the writer was where he belonged: in some dark corner, watching.

Then, behold! Francine Bowers approached our table. She smiled at Sarah and Jon, then spoke to me, "Did you write in that leg scene for me yet?"

"Francine, it's in there. You get to flash them."

"You'll see. I have great legs!"

"I certainly hope so."

She leaned over the table toward me, smiled her beautiful smile, her eyes shone above those famous high cheek bones. "Don't worry."

Then she straightened and was gone, off to another table.

"I have to see Friedman about something," said Jon.

"Yes," I said, "ask him about pay day."

Sarah and I continued to sit and study the crowd. Sarah was good at parties. She pointed people out to me, told me about them. I saw things that I never would have noticed. I had most of humanity pegged on a very low scale and preferred not even to take notice of them. So Sarah made them a bit more interesting, which I appreciated.

The night wore on, and as usual Sarah and I didn't order any food. Eating was hard work and, after 2 or 3 drinks, the food was tasteless. Strangely as the wine got warmer it seemed to taste better. Then, out of nowhere, appeared Jon Pinchot.

"Look," he pointed to a table, "over there is one of Friedman's lawyers."

"Good," I said, "I'm going over there. Please join me, Sarah…"

We walked over and sat down. The lawyer was well into his cups. Next to him was a very tall, blond lady. She sat tall and rigid, as if frozen. She had a long long neck and the neck stretched and stretched, rigid. It was painful to look at her. She looked frozen.

The lawyer knew us.

"Ah, Chinaski," he said, "and Sarah…"

"Hello," said Sarah.

"Hello," I said.

"This is my wife, Helga…"

We said hello to Helga. She didn't answer. She was frozen, sitting tall in her chair.

The lawyer waved in some drinks. Two bottles appeared. Things looked good. The lawyer, Tommy Henderson, poured.

"Betcha you don't like lawyers," he said to me.

"Not as a group, no."

"Well, I'm an all-right lawyer, I'm not a crook. You think because I'm working for Friedman that I'm out to screw everybody?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm not…"

Tommy drained his wine glass, poured another. I drained mine.

"Take it easy, Hank," said Sarah, "we have to drive back."

"If it gets too bad we'll take a cab back. The lawyer will pay."

"That's right, I'll pay…"

"Well, in that case…" Sarah drained her glass right off.

The tall frozen woman was still frozen. Mostly it was painful to look at her. Her neck was so long and stretched that the veins protruded—long hard aching veins. It was truly awful.

"My wife," said the lawyer, "has given up drinking."

"Oh, I see…" I said.

“Good for you,” said Sarah, “that takes courage, especially with people drinking all around you.”

“I couldn’t do it,” I said, “worst thing in the world is being sober around a bunch of damn fool drunks.”

“I woke up alone and naked one morning at 5 a.m. on the sands of Malibu. That did it for me.”

“Good for you,” I said, “it takes guts to cut it out.”

“Don’t let anybody talk you out of it,” said Sarah.

The lawyer, Tommy Henderson, poured fresh drinks for himself, Sarah and me.

“Chinaski doesn’t like me,” he said to his wife, Helga. “He thinks I’m a crook.”

“I don’t blame him,” said Helga.

“Oh yeah? Oh yeah?” said the lawyer. He drained most of his drink, then looked at me. He stared deeply. “You think I’m a crook?”

“Well,” I said, “probably...”

“You think we’re not going to pay you?”

“That’s the feeling that I have ...”

“Well, listen, I’ve read most of your books, what do you think of that? I think you’re a great writer. I think you’re almost as good as Updike.”

“Thanks.”

“And, listen to this, this morning I mailed out all the checks. You people are going to get paid. You’ll have your money in the next mail.”

“It’s true,” said Helga, “I saw him put the checks in the mail.”

“Great,” I said, “you know, it’s only fair...”

“Sure, it’s fair. We want to be fair. We had a cash flow problem. Now it’s solved.”

“It’s going to be a good movie,” I said.

“I know it. I’ve read the script,” said Tommy. “Now, do you feel better about everything?”

“Hell yes.”

“Do you still think I’m a crook?”

“Well, no, I can’t.”

"Let's drink to it!" said Tommy.

He filled the glasses. We raised them in a toast. That is, Tommy, Sarah and I did.

"To an honest world," I said.

We clicked the glasses and drank them down.

I noticed that the veins in Helga's neck were protruding further than ever. Nevertheless, we drank on.

We made small talk. A lot of it was about how brave Helga was.

We were the last to leave. That is, Helga, Tommy, Sarah and myself. The remaining two waiters gave us very dirty looks as we left. But Sarah and I were used to that. And Tommy most probably was too. Helga walked with us toward the exit, still rigid and suffering. Well, she wouldn't have a hangover in the morning. Then, it would be our turn.

31

We went down to the other set on Alvarado Street on Monday a week later. We parked a couple of blocks away and walked over. As we got closer we could see that there was some activity around Jack Bledsoe's Rolls-Royce.

"They're taking some shots," said Sarah.

There was Jack Bledsoe standing on the hood of the Rolls and standing up there with him were two of his biker pals. The flashbulbs went off, the bikers laughed, Bledsoe smiled and they all walked around on the hood in their heavy boots, changing positions for more shots.

"I don't think that's too good for the hood," said Sarah.

Then I saw Jon Pinchot. He walked toward us. There was a tired smile upon his face.

"What the hell's going on here, Jon?"

"We have to keep the children happy."

Then there was a yell from one of the bikers. Everybody leaped off the hood. The shots were finished. They walked off, laughing and talking.

"Look at those dents on the hood," said Jon.

"Everywhere. Didn't they notice?"

"They don't know. They live, not knowing."

"That poor beautiful car," said Sarah.

(It would later cost $6,000 to get those dents taken out of the hood and to repaint it.) "You talked to the lawyer at the party, didn't you, Hank?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"He said the checks had been mailed out."

"That's true. I got them and deposited them in my account."

Jon opened his wallet. He took them out. There were two of them. Stamped across the face of each it said: *Insufficient Funds*.

“They are on a Netherlands bank. Rubber.”

“I can’t believe this,” I said.

“Why?” Sarah asked. “Why is Firepower doing this?”

“I don’t know. I confronted Friedman this morning. He claimed the checks were good, that the accountant deposited funds in the wrong bank account and that as soon as the funds were transferred back the checks would be good. I told him, These are drawn on a Netherlands bank. No bank here will touch them when they are marked and stamped as they are. You must write me new checks.’ Friedman said, ‘No, I can’t do this on my own. I must wait for my accountant to straighten it out.’ “

“I can’t believe it,” I said.

“I told Friedman, ‘All right, let’s get your accountant in here.’ And he said, ‘My accountant is at the deathbed of his mother in . Chicago. She is dying of cancer.’ Then he leaned back in his chair and looked out the window.”

“ ‘Mr. Friedman,’ I told him, ‘this is not right.’ “

“Then what did the monster say?” Sarah asked.

“He looked at me with those innocent blue eyes and he said, ‘Remember, baby, nobody else in this town wanted this film. They spit on it. They laughed at it. We took it on, remember that. Work with us, honey-boy, and you’ll be in the clover.’ “

“Then what did you do?”

“Sarah, Hank, please come with me now,” Jon said. “We are getting ready to shoot the bathtub scene. Remember it?”

“Yes, of course. Are you going to go ahead without pay?”

We walked toward the set.

“The bathtub scene is going to be a good one. I like it,” Jon said.

“Yes,” I said, “it’s all right.”

Jon continued his story. “Anyhow, after seeing Friedman, I went around the block. I walked around the block twice looking at that green Firepower building. Then I finally had had it. I walked back to Friedman’s office…Pardon me, Hank, please stand behind me as I sit in this chair…”

“Huh?”

There was a photographer standing and waiting. Jon sat in a chair.

"Are you behind me?"

"Yes."

"Now give a big phoney smile."

I did.

The flash went off.

"Again," said Jon.

The flash went off again.

"Good. That's it."

Jon got up. "Follow me. We're shooting upstairs..."

We began up the stairway.

"Friedman and Fischman had a photo just like that taken last week, Friedman in the chair, Fischman standing behind him, both of them smiling. The photo appeared as a full page ad in Variety. And under it were the words, FIREPOWER WILL WIN!"

"Yeah?"

"Wait. Stop here. Let me tell the rest before we enter the set."

"All right."

We stood there at the top of the stairway. The shooting was to take place down the hall.

"I went back to his office. I told Friedman that I had seen his ad in *Variety*. I said that you and I were taking out an ad next week. You and I with the same pose. And underneath would also be a picture of the two bounced checks with the caption, FIREPOWER WILL WIN, BUT HOW? I told him that unless we received two *certified checks* within 48 hours that this ad would appear."

There was an extremely tall man standing at the end of the hall. It was Jon's assistant director, Marsh Edwards.

"We're ready to shoot, Jon. Everything's ready."

"Wait...I'll be right there..."

"Maybe you can tell us later?" Sarah asked.

"No, I want to finish. Then I told Friedman, 'On the other hand, if we get the *certified checks* within 48 hours, we can still run the ad in *Variety*, minus the Netherland checks, and the caption will say, FIREPOWER, WE WILL HELP YOU WIN!' "

"What'd he say?" I asked.

"He didn't say anything for a while. Then he said, 'O.K., you'll have your checks.' "

"But those shots you just took of us have big fake smiles. Won't we need better shots for a FIREPOWER, WE WILL HELP YOU WIN! ad?"

"If we get the checks," said Jon, "we'll forget the ad. Such an ad would cost $2,000."

With that we moved along the hall to shoot the bathtub scene.

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The bathtub scene was a simple one. Francine was to sit in the tub and Jack Bledsoe was to sit with his back against it, there on the floor, while Francine sat in the water talking about various things, mainly about a killer who lived there in her building, now on parole. He was shacked up with an old woman and beat her continually. One could hear the killer and his lady ranting and cursing through the walls.

Jon Pinchot had asked me to write the sound of people cursing through the walls and I had given him several pages of dialog. Basically, that had been the most enjoyable part of writing the screenplay.

Oftentimes in those roominghouses and cheap apartments there was nothing to do when you were broke and starving and down to the last bottle. There was nothing to do but listen to those wild arguments. It made you realize that you weren't the only one who was more than discouraged with the world, you weren't the only one moving toward madness.

We couldn't watch the bathtub scene because there just wasn't space enough in there, so Sarah and I waited in the front room of the apartment with its kitchen off to the side. Actually, over 30 years ago I had briefly lived in that same building on Alvarado Street with the lady I was writing the screenplay about. Strange and chilling indeed. "Everything that goes around comes around." In one way or another. And after 30 years the place looked just about the same. Only the people I'd known had all died. And the lady had died 3 decades ago and there I was sitting drinking a beer in that same building full of cameras and sound and crew. Well, I'd die too, soon enough. Pour one for me.

They were cooking food in the little kitchen and the refrigerator was full of beers. I made a few trips in there. Sarah found people to talk to. She was lucky. Every time somebody spoke to me I felt like diving out a window or taking the elevator down. People just weren't interesting. Maybe they weren't supposed to be. But animals, birds, even insects were. I couldn't understand it.

Jon Pinchot was still one day ahead of the shooting schedule and I was damned glad for that. It kept Firepower off our backs. The big boys didn't come around. They had their spies, of course. I could pick them out.

Some of the crew had books of mine. They asked for autographs. The books they had were curious ones. That is, I didn't consider them my best. (My best book is always the last one that I have written.) Some of them had a book of my early dirty stories, *Jacking-Off the Devil*. A few had books of poems, *Mozart In the Fig Tree and Would You Let This Man Babysit Your 4 Year Old Daughter?* Also, *The Bar Latrine Is My Chapel.*

The day wafted on, peacefully but listlessly.

Some bathtub scene, I thought. Francine must be fully cleansed by now.

Then Jon Pinchot just about ran into the room. He looked undone. Even his zipper was only halfway up. He was uncombed. His eyes looked wild and drained at the same time.

"My god!" he said, "here you are!"

"How's it going?"

He leaned over and whispered into my ear. "It's awful, it's maddening! Francine is worried that her tits might show above the water! She keeps asking 'Do my tits show?' "

"What's a little titty?"

Jon leaned closer. "She's not as young as she'd like to be...And Hyans hates the lighting...He can't abide the lighting and he's drinking more than ever..."

Hyans was the cameraman. He'd won damn near every award and prize in the business, one of the best cameramen alive, but like most good souls he liked a drink now and then.

Jon went on, whispering frantically: "And Jack, he can't get this one line right. We have to cut again and again. There is something about the line that bothers him and he gets this silly smile on his face when he says it."

"What's the line?"

"The line is, 'He must masturbate his parole officer when he comes around.' "

"All right, try, 'He must jack-off his parole officer when he comes around.' "

"Good, thank you! THIS IS GOING TO BE THE 19TH TAKE!"

"My god," I said.

"Wish me luck..."

"Luck. .

Jon was out of the room then. Sarah walked over.

"What's wrong?"

"19th take. Francine is afraid to show her tits, Jack can't say his line and Hyans doesn't like the lighting..."

"Francine needs a drink," she said, "it will loosen her up."

"Hyans doesn't need a drink."

"I know. And Jack will be able to say his line when Francine loosens up."

"Maybe."

Just then Francine walked into the room. She looked totally lost, completely out of it. She was in a bathrobe, had a towel around her head.

"I'm going to tell her," Sarah said.

She walked over to Francine and spoke quietly to her. Francine listened. She gave a little nod, then walked into the bedroom off to the left. In a moment Sarah came out of the kitchen with a coffeecup. Well, there was scotch, vodka, whiskey, gin in that kitchen. Sarah had mixed something. The door opened, closed and the coffeecup was gone.

Sarah came over. "She'll be all right now..."

Two or three minutes passed, then the bedroom door flung open. Francine came out, headed for the bathroom and the camera. As she went past, her eyes found Sarah: "Thank you!"

Well, there was nothing to do but sit about and indulge in more small talk.

I couldn't help but look back into the past. This was the very building I had been thrown out of for having 3 women in my room one night. In those days there was no such thing as Tenants' Rights.

"Mr. Chinaski," the landlady had said, "we have religious people living here, working people, people with children. Never have I heard such complaints from the other tenants. And I heard you too-all that singing, all that cursing...things breaking...coarse language and laughter...In all my days, never have I heard anything like what went on in your room last night!"

"All right, I'll leave..."

"Thank you."

I must have been mad. Unshaven. Undershirt full of cigarette holes. My only desire was to have more than one bottle on the dresser. I was not fit for the world and the world was not fit for me and I had found some others like myself, and most of them were women, women most men would never want to be in the same room with, but I adored them, they inspired me, I play-acted, swore, pranced about in my underwear telling them how great I was, but only / believed that. They just hollered, "Fuck off! Pour some more booze!" Those ladies from hell, those ladies in hell with me.

Jon Pinchot walked briskly into the room.

"It worked!" he told me. "Everything worked! What a day! Now, tomorrow we start again!"

"Give Sarah the credit," I said. "She knows how to mix a magic drink."

"What?"

"She loosened up Francine with something in a coffeecup."

Jon turned to Sarah.

"Thank you very much..."

"Any time," Sarah answered.

"God," said Jon, "I've been in this business a long time and never *nineteen* takes!"

"I've heard," I answered, "that Chaplin sometimes took a hundred takes before he got it right."

"That was Chaplin," said Jon. "A hundred takes and our whole budget would be used up."

And that was about all for that day. Except Sarah said, "Hell, let's go to Musso's."

Which we did. And we got a table in the Old Room and ordered a couple of drinks while we looked at the menu.

"Remember?" I asked, "remember in the old days when we used to come here to look at the people at the tables and try to spot the types, the actor types, the producer or director types, the porno types, the agents, the pretenders? And we used to think, 'Look at them, talking about their half-assed movie deals or their contracts or their last films.' What moles, what misfits...better to look away when the swordfish and the sand dabs arrive."

"We thought they were shit," said Sarah, "and now we are."

"What goes around comes around..."

"Right! I think I'll have the sand dabs..."

The waiter stood above us, shuffling his feet, scowling, the hairs of his eyebrows falling down into his eyes. Musso's had been there since 1919 and everything was a pain in the ass to him: us, and everybody else in the place. I agreed. Decided on the swordfish. With french fries.

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The film was being shot in 3 locations. Different rooms, different streets and alleys, different bars had to be juggled about.

There was a night scene which was to entail some stealing of corn from a vacant lot and a chase by the police.

The corn had been planted and was ready to steal.

To use the location cost the budget 5 thousand dollars. The vacant lot was now owned by a Rehabilitation Center for Alcoholics. Pinchot had searched everywhere for a cheaper location but finally had to settle for that one, which actually was the same vacant lot which my lady had stolen the corn from over 3 decades ago. The new corn had been planted in the exact location where the old corn had been planted. Other things were not quite so exact. The apartment building nearby where the lady had lived, the one I moved into with her, had now been turned into a Home for the Aged.

The large building next to the vacant lot, now being used as a Rehabilitation Center, back then had been a popular ballroom. It was always busy especially on Saturday nights. The entire bottom floor was a ballroom, gigantic, with large globes of light slowly turning in the ceiling as the live band played dance music until early in the a.m. while many fancy cars, some with chauffeurs, waited outside.

We hated that ballroom and those people while we starved and fought with each other and the police and the landlord, as we were taken to and then bailed out of the Lincoln Heights Jail.

Now that building was full of reformed drunks who read the Bible, smoked too many cigarettes and played Bingo in the room that had once been the grand ballroom.

The vacant lot was all that hadn't changed. In all those decades nobody had ever built a structure of any kind there.

Francine and Jack had already had a couple of rehearsals and had vanished into their trailers and we were standing around waiting for the action. I was tilting a beer when there was a tap on my shoulder. It was a nice looking fellow, neatly trimmed beard, nice eyes, nice smile. I had seen him about, but didn't know him, didn't know his position and didn't ask. Actually I guessed that his real job was being a Firepower spy.

"Please," he said, "we can't have drinking on the set here."

"Why not?"

"In the contract we signed with the people here it states that we can shoot on the premises but no drinking will be allowed."

"Water?"

"You know what I mean."

"Yes, those x-drunks can't stand to see anybody else have a drink."

"They don't believe in it."

"But the whole movie is *about* drinking."

"We had a very hard time securing these premises. Please don't spoil it."

"O.K., buddy. But it's for Pinchot, not you..."

He walked off with his clipboard, wobbling his soft little ass which had not been kicked often enough.

I turned my back to the building, took another gulp, put the bottle in my coat pocket.

"They can see you," said Sarah.

"You mean all those x-drunks are hanging out of windows watching me drink this beer?"

"No, but they have people around."

"All right, I'll go into hiding when I take a hit of my beer."

"You're acting as spoiled as some of these stars."

Sarah was correct. I had no right to be spoiled. The leading man was making 750 times as much money as I was.

Then Jon Pinchot found us.

"Hello, Sarah...Hello, Hank..."

He told me that Friedman had actually sent the new checks, that mine had been made out directly to me and was in the mail. Our scheme had succeeded.

"I've got to go," said Jon, "we're about ready to shoot the cornfield scene. You watch it and let me know what you think..."

Finally they went into action and Francine ran up the hill to the rows of corn.

"I want some corn!" she screamed.

I remembered Jane going up that same hill while I was carrying the large sack of bottles. Only when she had screamed "I want some corn!" it had been as if she wanted the whole world back, the world that she had somehow missed out on or the world that had somehow passed her by. The corn was to be her victory, her reward, her revenge, her song.

But when Francine screamed, "I want some corn!" it sounded petulant, there was a whine in her voice, and it was not the desperate voice of the drunk. It was all right, it was good but it wasn't quite right.

Then when Francine began ripping at the ears I knew that it wasn't the same, that it could never be the same. Francine was an actress. Jane had been a mad drunk. Properly and finally mad. But one doesn't expect perfection from a performance. A good imitation will do.

So Francine ripped the corn, stuffed it in her purse, Jack saying, "You're drunk...That corn is green..."

Then the cop car rolled up, flashing its red light and its bright spotlight on them, and Francine and Jack ran toward her place, just as Jane and I had, and they just got to the elevator as the cops shouted over the loudspeaker, "HALT OR WE'LL FIRE!"

But instead of those cops jumping out of the car and running after Jack and Francine they just sat there. The shot was over.

It took Sarah and me a few minutes to find Jon Pinchot.

He was just standing there, quietly.

"Jon, man, the cops were supposed to get out and chase their ass!"

"I know. The car doors got stuck. They couldn't get out."

"What?"

"I know. It's unbelievable. We are going to have to fix the car doors and shoot it all over."

"We're sorry," said Sarah.

Jon was depressed. He usually laughed when things went wrong.

"I'll get back to you after we re-shoot it."

We left, walked back across the street. I hated to see Jon deflated that way. He had natural guts. Some people disliked him because he seemed to have too much bravado. But most of it was real. We all played at being brave. I did too. But I didn't like to see Jon lose his bravado.

Francine and Jack and many of the other people returned to their trailers. I hated the long delays between shots. Movies cost a great deal of money because most of the time nobody was doing anything but waiting and waiting and waiting. Until this was ready and that was ready and the lighting was ready and the camera was ready and the hairdresser had finished pissing and the consultant had been consulted, nothing happened. It was all a deliberate jack-off, a salary for this and a salary for that, and there was only one man who was allowed to put a plug in the wall, and the sound man was pissed-off at the assistant director, and then the actors were not feeling good because that's the way actors were supposed to feel and so forth. It was all waste waste waste. Even on this extremely low budget film, I felt like yelling, "ALL RIGHT, CUT OUT THE SHIT! THERE'S NOTHING HERE THAT CAN'T BE DONE IN 10 MINUTES AND YOU HAVE BEEN TAKING HOURS PLAYING AROUND WITH IT!"

I didn't have the guts to say it. I was just the writer. A minor expense.

Then I got an ego boost. A television crew came from Italy and one came from Germany. They both wanted interviews with me. The directors were both ladies.

"He promised us first," said the Italian lady.

"But you'll take all his juice away," said the German lady.

"I hope so," said the Italian lady.

I sat down before the Italian lights. We were on camera.

"What do you think of film?"

"Movies?"

"Yes."

"I stay away from them."

"What do you do when you're not writing?"

"Horses. Bet them."

"Do they help your writing?"

"Yes. They help me forget about it."

"Are you drunk in this movie?"

"Yes."

"Do you think drinking is brave?"

"No, but nothing else is either."

"What does your movie mean?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. Peeking up the ass of death, maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Maybe means not sure."

"What do you see when you look up the 'ass of death'?"

"The same thing you do."

"What is your philosophy of life?"

"Think as little as possible."

"Anything else?"

"When you can't think of anything else to do, be kind."

"That's nice."

"Nice is not necessarily kind."

"All right, Mr. Chinaski. What word do you have for the Italian people?"

"Don't shout so much. And read Celine."

The lights went out on that one.

The German interview was even less interesting.

The lady kept wanting to know how much I drank.

"He drinks but not as much as he used to," Sarah told her.

"I need another drink right now or I'm not going to talk anymore."

It came immediately. It was in a large white paper cup and I drank it down. Ah, it was good. It suddenly seemed foolish to me that anybody wanted to know what I thought. The best part of a writer is on paper. The other part was usually nonsense.

The German lady was right. The Italian lady had used up all my juice.

I was now a spoiled star. And I was worried about the cornfield shoot.

I needed to talk to Jon, to tell him to make Francine drunker, madder, with one foot in hell, one hand yanking corn from the stalk as death approached, with the nearby buildings having faces out of dreams, looking down on the sadness of existence for us all: the rich, the poor, the beautiful and the ugly, the talented and useless.

"You don't like movies?" the German lady asked.

"No."

The lights went out. The interview was over.

And the cornfield scene got reshot. Maybe not exactly the way it could have been, but almost.

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It was ten a.m. when the phone rang. It was Jon Pinchot.

"The film has been cancelled..."

"Jon, I no longer believe such stories. It's just their way of getting more leverage."

"No, it's true, the film has been cancelled."

"How can they? They've invested too much, they'd take a huge loss on the project..."

"Hank, Firepower just doesn't have any more money. Not only has our film been cancelled, *all* films have been cancelled. I went to their office building this morning. There are only the security guards. There is NOBODY in the building! I walked all through it, screaming, 'Hello! Hello! Is anybody here?' There was no answer. The whole building is empty."

"But, Jon, how about Jack Bledsoe's 'Play or Pay' clause?"

"They can't pay or play him. All the people at Firepower, including us, are without any more income. Some of them have been working for 2 weeks now without pay. Now there's no more money for anybody..."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know, Hank, this looks like the end..."

"Don't make any hasty moves, Jon. Maybe some other company will take over the film?"

"They won't. Nobody likes the screenplay."

"Oh, yeah, that's right..."

"What are you going to do?"

"Me? I'm going to the track. But if you want to come over for some drinks this evening, I'd be glad to see you."

"Thanks, Hank, but I've got a date with a couple of lesbians."

"Good luck."

"Good luck to you too..."

I drove north up the Harbor freeway toward Hollywood Park. I'd been playing the horses over 30 years. It started after my near fatal hemorrhage at the L. A. County Hospital. They told me that if I took another drink that I was dead.

"What'll I do?" I had asked Jane.

"About what?"

"What'll I use as a substitute for drink?"

"Well, there are the horses."

"Horses? What do you do?"

"Bet on them."

"Bet on them? Sounds stupid."

We went and I won handsomely. I began to go on a daily basis. Then, slowly, I began to drink a little again. Then I drank more. And I didn't die. So then I had both drinking *and* the horses. I was hooked all around. In those days there was no Sunday racing, so I would nurse the old car all the way to Agua Caliente and back on Sunday, a few times staying for the dog races after the horses were through, and then hitting the Caliente bars. I was never robbed or rolled and was treated rather kindly by both the Mexican bartenders and the patrons even though sometimes I was the only gringo. The late night drive back was nice and when I got home I didn't care whether Jane was there or not. I had told her that Mexico was simply too dangerous for a lady. She usually wasn't home when I got in. She was in a much more dangerous place: Alvarado Street. But as long as there were 3 or 4 beers waiting for me, it was all right. If she drank those and left the refrigerator empty, then she was in *real* trouble.

As for horses, I became a real student of the game. I had about two dozen systems. They all worked only you couldn't apply them all at one time because they were based on varying factors. My systems had only one common factor: that the Public must always lose. You had to determine what the Public play was and then try to do the opposite.

One of my systems was based on index numbers and post positions. There are certain numbers that the public is reluctant to call. When these numbers get a certain amount of play on the board in relation to their post position you have a high percentage winner. By studying many years of result charts from tracks in Canada, the USA and Mexico I came up with a winning play based solely upon these index numbers. (The index number indicates the track and race where the horse made its last appearance.) The *Racing Form* used to put out big, fat, red result books for $10. I read them over for hours, for weeks. All results have a pattern. If you can find the pattern, you're in. And you can tell your boss to jam it up his ass. I had told this to several bosses, only to have to find new ones. Mostly because I altered or cheated on my own systems. The weakness of human nature is one more thing you must defeat at the track.

I pulled into Hollywood Park and drove through the "Sticker Lane." A horse trainer I knew had given me an "Owner/Trainer" parking sticker and also a pass to the clubhouse. He was a good man and the best thing about him was that he wasn't a writer or an actor.

I walked into the clubhouse, found a table and worked at my figures. I always did that first, then paid a buck to go over to the Cary Grant Pavilion. There weren't many people there and you could think better. About Cary Grant, they have a huge photo of him hanging in the pavilion. He's got on old-fashioned glasses and that smile. Cool. But what a horseplayer he was. He was a two dollar bettor. And when he lost he would run out toward the track screaming, waving his arms and yelling, "YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO ME!" If you're only going to bet two dollars you might as well stay home and take your money and move it from one pocket to the other.

On the other hand, *my* biggest bet was $20 win. Excessive greed can create errors because very heavy outlays affect your thinking processes. Two more things. Never bet the horse with the highest speed rating off his last race and never bet a big closer.

My day out there was pleasant enough but as always I resented that 30 minute wait between races. It was too long. You can feel your life being pounded to a pulp by the useless waste of time. I mean, you just sit in your chair and hear all the voices talking about who should win and why. It's really sickening. Sometimes you think that you're in a madhouse. And in a way, you are. Each of those jerk-offs thinks he knows more than the other jerk-offs and there they were all together in one place. And there I was, sitting there with them.

I liked the actual action, that time when all your calculations came out correctly at the wire and life had some sense, some rhythm and meaning. But the wait between races was a real horror: sitting with a mumbling, bumbling humanity that would never learn or get better, would only get worse with time. I often threatened my good wife Sarah that I would stay home from the track during the days and write dozens and dozens of immortal poems.

So I managed to get through the afternoon out there and headed back home, winner of a little over $100. Drove back with the working crowd. What a gang they were. Pissed and vicious and broke. In a hurry to get home to fuck if possible, to look at TV, to get to sleep early in order to do the same thing next day all over again.

I pulled into the driveway and Sarah was watering the garden. She was a great gardener. And she put up with my insanities. She fed me healthy food, cut my hair and toenails and generally kept me going in many ways.

I parked the car and went out to the garden, gave her a hello kiss.

"Did you win?" she asked.

"Yeah. Sure. A little."

"No phone calls," she said.

"Too bad, all this…" I said. "You know, after Jon threatened to cut off his finger and all that. I really feel sorry for him."

"Maybe you should have asked him over tonight."

"I did, but he was tied up."

"S & M?"

"I don't know. A couple of lesbians. Some sort of relief for him."

"Did you notice the roses?"

"Yes, they look great. Those reds and whites and yellows. Yellow is my favorite color. I feel like eating yellow."

Sarah walked with the hose over to the faucet, shut off the water and we walked into the house together. Life was not too bad, sometimes.

35

Then, just like that, the movie was on again. Like most of the news it came over the phone via Jon. “Yes,” he told me, “we begin production again tomorrow.”

“I don’t understand. I thought the movie was dead.”

“Firepower sold some assets. A film library and some hotels they owned in Europe. On top of that they managed to swing a big loan from an Italian group. It’s said that this Italian money is a bit tainted but. . . it’s money. Anyhow, I’d like you and Sarah to come to the shooting tomorrow.”

“I don’t know...”

“It’s tomorrow night...”

“O.K., fine...When and where?”

Sarah and I sat in a booth. It was Friday night and there was a good feel in the air. We were sitting there when Rick Talbot walked in and sat down with us. There he was in our booth. He only wanted a coffee. I had seen him many times on TV reviewing movies with his counterpart, Kirby Hudson. They were very good at what they did and often got emotional about it all. They gave entertaining evaluations and although others had attempted to copy their format, they were far superior to their competitors.

Rick Talbot looked much younger than he did on TV. Also, he appeared to be more withdrawn, almost shy.

“We watch you often,” Sarah said.

“Thank you...”

“Listen,” I asked him, “what bothers you most about Kirby Hudson?”

“It’s his finger...When he points his finger.”

Then Francine Bowers walked in. She slid into the booth. We greeted her. She knew Rick Talbot. Francine had a little note pad.

"Listen, Hank, I want to know some more about Jane. Indian, right?"

"Half-Indian, half-Irish."

"Why did she drink?"

"It was a place to hide and also a slow form of suicide."

"Did you ever take her any place besides a bar?"

"I took her to a baseball game once. To Wrigley Field, back when the L.A. Angels played in the Pacific Coast League."

"What happened?"

"We both got quite drunk. She got mad at me and ran out of the park. I drove for hours looking for her. When I got back to the room, there she was passed out on the bed."

"How did she speak? Was she loud?"

"She would be quiet for hours. Then all at once she would go crazy and start yelling, cursing and throwing things. I wouldn't react at first. Then she'd get to me. I'd walk up and down, up and down, yelling and cursing back. This would go on for maybe about 20 minutes, then we'd quiet down, drink some more and begin again. We were continually being evicted. We were thrown out of so many places that we couldn't remember them all. Once, looking for a new place, we knocked on a door. It opened and there stood a landlady who had just gotten rid of us. She saw us, turned white, screamed and slammed the door..."

"Is Jane dead now?" asked Rick Talbot.

"Long time dead. They're all dead. All those I drank with."

"What keeps you going?"

"I like to type. It gives me a thrill."

"And I've got him on vitamins and a low-fat, non-red-meat diet," Sarah told her.

"Do you still drink?" Rick asked.

"Mostly when I type or when people come around. I'm not happy around people and after I drink enough they seem to vanish."

"Tell me some more about Jane," Francine asked.

"Well, she slept with a rosary under her pillow…"

"Did she go to church?"

"At strange times she went to what she called 'the alka seltzer mass.' I believe it began at 8:30 a.m. and ran about an hour. She hated the ten o'clock mass which often ran over two hours."

"Did she go to Confession?"

"I didn't ask. . ."

"Can you tell me anything about her which would explain her character?"

"Only that in spite of all the seemingly terrible things she did, the cursing, the madness, the love of the bottle, she always did things with a certain style. I'd like to think that I learned a few things about style from her…"

"I want to thank you for these things, I think they might help."

"You're welcome,"

Then Francine and her note pad were gone.

"I don't think I've ever had such a good time on a set," said Rick Talbot.

"What do you mean, Rick?" Sarah asked.

"It's a feel in the air. Sometimes with low budget films you get that feel, that carnival feel. It's here. But I feel it more here than I ever have…"

He meant it. His eyes sparkled, he smiled with real joy.

I called for another round of drinks.

"Just coffee for me," he said.

The new round came and then Rick said, "Look! There's Sesteenov!"

"Who?" I asked.

"He did that marvelous film on Pet Cemeteries! Hey, Sesteenov!"

Sesteenov came over.

"Please sit down," I asked.

Sesteenov slid into the booth.

"Care for anything to drink?" I asked.

"Oh, no…"

"Look," said Rick Talbot, "there's Illiantovitch!"

I knew Illiantovitch. He had made some crazy dark movies, the main theme being the violence in life overcome by the courage of people. But he did it well, roaring out of the blackness.

He was a very tall man with a crooked neck and crazy eyes. The crazy eyes kept looking at you, looking at you. It was a bit embarrassing.

We slid over to let him in. The booth was full.

“Care for a drink?” I asked him.

“Double vodka,” he said.

I liked that, waved to the barkeep.

“Double vodka,” he told the barkeep while fixing him with his crazy eyes. The barkeep ran off to do his duty.

“This is a great night,” said Rick.

I loved Rick’s lack of sophistication. That took guts, when you were on top, to say that you enjoyed what you did, that you were having fun while you did it.

Illiantovitch got his double vodka, slammed it down.

Rick Talbot was asking questions of everybody, including Sarah. There was no feeling of competition or envy in that booth. I felt totally comfortable.

Then Jon Pinchot walked in. He came up to the booth, gave a little bow, grinning, “We’re going to shoot soon, I hope. I will come get everybody then…”

“Thank you, Jon…”

Then he moved off.

“He’s a good director,” said Rick Talbot, “but I’d like to know why you chose him.”

“He chose me…”

“Really?”

“Yes…and I can tell you a story about him that will explain why he is a good director and why I like him. But it’s off the record…”

“Let me hear it,” said Rick.

“Off the record?”

“Of course…”

I leaned forward into the booth and told the story about Jon and the electric chainsaw and his little finger.

"That really happen?" Rick asked.

"Yes. Off the record."

"Of course..."

(I knew: nothing is off the record once you tell it.) Meanwhile, Illiantovitch had finished 2 double vodkas and was sitting looking at another. He kept staring at me. Then he took out his wallet and pulled out a greasy business card. He handed it to me. All 4 corners were worn away and it was limp and dark with grime. It had given up being a business card. Illiantovitch looked like a soiled genius. I admired him for it. He was hardly weighed down by pretense. He grabbed the double vodka and tossed it down his throat.

Then he looked at me, heavily. I stared back. But his dark eyes were entirely too much. I had to look away. I motioned in the barkeep for a refill. Then I looked back at Illiantovitch.

"You're the best man," I said. "After you there is nothing."

"No, not so," he said, "YOU are the best! I give you my card! On card is time of SCREENING OF MY NEW MOVIE! YOU MUST BE THERE!"

"Sure, baby," I said and I took out my wallet and carefully placed the card in there.

"This is a hell of a night," said Rick Talbot.

There was some more small talk, then Jon Pinchot walked in.

"We're about ready to shoot. Will you please come outside now so that we can find places for you?"

We all got up to follow Jon, except Illiantovitch. He sank into the booth.

"Fuck it! I am going to have more double vodkas! You people go!"

That bastard had stolen a page or two from me. He waved to the barkeep, took out a bent cigarette, stuck it between his lips, flicked his lighter and burnt part of his nose.

That bastard.

We walked out into the night.

36

They were set up to shoot in the alley. There was to be an alley fight between the bartender and the barfly. It was cold out there. Almost everything was ready. There was to be a double in the fight scene for both the bartender and Jack Bledsoe. The closeups were to show the faces of Bledsoe and the bartender but the real fight scenes were to be with the doubles.

Bledsoe saw me. “Hey, Hank, come here!”

I walked over.

“Let them see your fighting style.”

I circled about, shooting out weak left jabs, then now and then I rushed forward throwing lefts and rights. Then I stopped. I explained those fights of long ago.

“It really didn’t look very good. At first, there was much circling. Around and around. And then the crowd would get on us and somebody would rush in. I believe that in spite of the drinking the exchanges were very hard and brutal. Then we would back off, size up the situation and charge again, fists pumping. It finally became a matter of outgutting the other guy. Only one could win. And a fight was never over until a man was unconscious. It was a good show and it was free...”

It got close to shooting time. We backed out of the alley and took positions out of the way. Just then Harry Friedman strolled in with a Hollywood babe with a wig, false eyelashes, excessive makeup. Her lips were done over to twice the size and her breasts too. Also strolling in was the great director, Manz Loeb, who had directed such films as *The Rat Man* and *Pencilhead*. Along with him was the famous actress Rosalind Bonelli. So we had to go over and be introduced. Loeb and Bonelli smiled nicely and were polite but I got the terrible feeling that they felt superior to us. But that was all right because I felt superior to them. That was just the way it worked.

Then we went back to our vantage points and the big fight began. It looked brutal enough, right from the start. Except in our fights the brutality came near the end when one fighter was helpless (usually me) and the other man would not quit.

Another thing about those fights. If you didn't belong to the Bartender's "Club," and you lost, you were left out there with the garbage cans and the rats. There were attendant memories. One morning I was awakened by the blaring of a horn and truck headlights shining upon me. It was the garbage truck.

"HEY, MAN, GET THE FUCK OUT OF THE WAY! WE ALMOST RAN YOU OVER!"

"Ohh, oh, I'm sorry..."

To get up then, dizzy, sick, beaten, leaning toward the suicide dream with those nice healthy black men only interested in staying on schedule and getting the garbage out of there.

Or it would be a black woman's head coming out of a window: "HEY, WHITE TRASH, GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM MY BACKDOOR!"

"Yes, ma'am, I'm sorry, ma'am..."

And the worst, upon first regaining consciousness, down between the garbage cans, aching too bad to move but knowing you are going to have to, the worst of all was the thought, I'll bet my wallet is gone again...

You play a game. You try to feel the wallet pressing against your ass without reaching for it. It feels vacant back there. You really don't want to reach with your hand but you do. And the wallet is *never* there. Then you manage to stand up and then you look through all your pockets: no wallet, ever. I became more and more discouraged with humanity.

Anyhow, then the fight scene was over and Jon Pinchot came over and asked, "Well?"

"Not quite right."

"Why?"

"Well, in our fights, the gladiators were more like clowns, they played to the crowd. One guy would land and almost blast the other guy off his feet, then turn to the crowd and say, 'Hey, how'd you like that one?' "

"They hammed it up?"

"Yes..."

Jon went over to the doubles and spoke to them. They listened. Good old Jon, probably one of the first directors to ever listen directly to the writer. I felt honored. My life had hardly been lucky, now it seemed to be getting so. I could take a little of that.

They shot the fight scene again.

I watched and I have to tell you that I grew weak watching that old dream. I wanted to be one of them, going at it again. Stupid or not, I felt like punching the alley wall. Born to die.

Then it was over. Jon walked over.

"Well?" he asked.

"I liked it..."

"Me too," he said.

Then that was it.

Sarah and I walked back to the booth in the bar.

Illiantovitch was gone. The bar had probably run out of vodka.

Sarah and I ordered and Rick went for another coffee.

"This is one of the best nights I ever had," said Rick.

"Listen, Rick, you've got to be playing with me. Where have you beea spending your nights?"

He just smiled into his coffee cup. He was a wonderful and innocent man.

Then Francine Bowers was back with her notebook.

"How did Jane die?"

"Well, I was with somebody else by that time. We had been split for 2 years and I came by to visit her just before Christmas. She was a maid at this hotel and very popular. Everybody in the hotel had given her a bottle of wine. And there in her room was this little wooden shelf that ran along the wall just below the ceiling and on this shelf there must have been 18 or 19 bottles.

“ ‘If you drink all that liquor, and you will, it will kill you! Don’t these people understand that?’ I asked her.

“Jane just looked at me.

“ ‘I’m going to take all of these fucking bottles out of here. These people are trying to murder you!’

“Again, she just looked at me. I stayed with her that night and drank 3 of the bottles myself, which brought it down to 15 or 16. In the morning when I left I told her, ‘Please, don’t drink all of them…’ I came back a week and a half later. Her door was open. There was a large blood stain in the bed. There were no bottles in the room. I located her at the L.A. County Hospital. She was in an alcoholic coma. I sat with her for a long time, just looking at her, wetting her lips with water, brushing the hair out of her eyes. The nurses left us alone. Then, all at once, she opened her eyes and said, ‘I knew it would be you.’ Three hours later she was dead.”

“She never had a real chance,” said Francine Bowers.

“She didn’t want one. She was the only person I’ve ever met who had the same contempt for the human race as I did.”

Francine folded up her notebook.

“I’m sure all this is going to help me…”

Then she was gone.

And Rick said, “Pardon me, but I have been studying you all evening and you don’t seem to be a vicious man.”

“And neither do you, Rick,” I said.

37

We were down there a few days later for some daylight shots and it was just after lunch when Jon Pinchot found us. We had not yet entered the bar.

"Wait," Jon told me, "the photographer Corbell Veeker will be here any moment. He wants to take some shots of you, Jack and Francine. This guy is known all over the world. He is famous for his shots of women, he really glamorizes them..."

So we stood around in the alley behind the bar. There was an admixture of shadow and sunlight there. I expected a long wait but Corbell Veeker arrived within 5 minutes. He was around 55 with a puffy face, pot belly. He wore a scarf and a beret. He had two boys with him, both of them packing equipment. The boys looked frightened and obedient.

There were introductions.

Then Corbell introduced his assistants.

"This is David..."

"This is William..."

They both gave tiny smiles.

Then Francine arrived. "Ah, ah, ah!" went Corbell Veeker as he ran up and kissed her.

Then he stepped back.

"Now, now, now...Ah! Ah!" he waved his arms. "This is it! Yes!"

There was an old broken down couch that had been abandoned behind the bar. It caught his eye.

"You," he looked at me, "you sit on the couch..."

I walked over and sat on the couch. "Now, Francine, you sit in his lap..."

Francine had on a bright red dress with a slitted skirt. She wore red shoes, red stockings and white pearls. She sat on my lap. I looked around and winked at Sarah.

"That's it! Yes!"

"Does my hard ass bother you?" Francine asked me.

"No, it's all right. Don't worry about it."

"Camera number FOUR!" Corbell Veeker screamed.

David ran up with camera number four and Corbell slung it around his neck, dropped to one knee…There was a click and a flash…

"FINE! YES! YES!"

Another click, another flash…

"YES! YES!"

Click, flash…

"FRANCINE, SHOW MORE LEG! THAT'S IT! YES! YES!"

Click and flash, click and flash…

He was shooting furiously, with passion…

"FILM! FILM!" he screamed.

William ran up with a new load of film, inserted it into the camera, put the exposed film into a special box.

Corbell dropped to both knees, focused, said, "SHIT, I DON'T WANT THIS CAMERA! CAMERA NUMBER SIX, PLEASE! NOW! NOW!"

David ran up with camera number six, affixed it to Corbell Veeker and took camera number four away.

"MORE LEG, FRANCINE! IT LOOKS GOOD! I LOVE YOU, FRANCINE! YOU ARE THE LAST GREAT STAR IN HOLLYWOOD!"

Click, flash…Click, flash…again…and again…and again.

Then Jack Bledsoe arrived.

"JACK, YOU GET ON THE COUCH TOO! ONE ON EACH SIDE! YES! YES!"

Click, flash…Click, flash…

"FILM! FILM!" Corbell screamed.

The photos were to be for a fancy woman's magazine with a very large circulation.

"ALL RIGHT, YOU GUYS OFF THE COUCH! I WANT FRANCINE ALONE!"

He had her lie lengthwise on the couch, elbow propped on the armrest, one arm thrown over the back, holding a long cigarette. Francine loved it.

Click, click, flash, flash…

The last great star in Hollywood.

The boys ran in with new film, new cameras…I guess they figured it beat working in a gas station.

Then Corbell noticed the wire fence.

“THE WIRE FENCE!” he screamed.

He had Francine lean provocatively against the wire fence with Jack Bledsoe on one side and me on the other.

“FINE! FINE!”

He loved the wire fence idea and took more and more shots. The wire fence turned him on. Maybe it was the background beyond the wire fence.

Flash, click, flash, click…

And then, like that, it was over.

“Thank you very much, everybody…”

He kissed Francine again. His boys were busy packing things, gathering things, numbering things. William had a notebook and he wrote everything down in the notebook: shot number, time, subject matter, camera and film used.

Then everybody just walked off and Sarah and I walked into the bar. The regular barflies were there. They were movie stars now and had developed a certain dignity. They had become quieter, as if thinking about great things. I liked them better the old way. The movie was just about finished and I was a little sorry I had missed so many days of shooting but then if you’re a horseplayer almost everything else has to go.

Sarah and I were taking it easy. I ordered a beer and she had a red wine.

“You think you’ll ever do another screenplay?” she asked.

“I doubt it. You just have to make too many fucking compromises. And you always have to think through the eye of the camera. Will the audience get it? And almost anything upsets or insults a movie audience, while people who read novels and short stories love to be upset and insulted.”

“Well, you’re good at that…”

Just then Jon Pinchot came into the bar. He took a seat to my left, smiled at us.

"Son of a bitch," he said.

"What is it?" asked Sarah.

"Has the movie been cancelled again?" I asked.

"No, not that…It's something else…"

"Like?"

"Jack Bledsoe refused to sign a release for the still photos that were just taken…"

"What?"

"Yes, one of Corbell Veeker's boys went over to his trailer with the papers and Jack refused to sign the release for the photos. Then Corbell went over there. Same thing."

"But why?" I asked. "Why did he allow himself to be photographed and then refuse to sign the release?"

"I don't know. But we can still go ahead and use the photos of you and Francine. Are you guys going to watch the next shot?"

"Sure…"

"I'll come get you…"

"Thanks…"

Sarah and I sat thinking about it. I suppose that she was thinking about it. I know that I was.

I just decided that actors were different than we were. They had their own reasons for things. You know, when you spend many hours, many years pretending to be a person who you aren't, well, that can do something to you. It's hard enough just trying to be yourself. Think of trying very hard to be somebody that you're not. And then being somebody else that you're not. And then somebody *else*. At first, you know, it could be exciting. But after a while, after being dozens of other people, maybe it would be hard to remember who you were yourself, especially if you had to make up your own lines.

I figured that Jack Bledsoe had gotten lost and decided that they were photographing somebody else and not him so that all that was left for him to do was to refuse to sign the release. It made sense to me. I decided to explain it to Sarah.

I watched her put her wine down and light a cigarette.

Then I thought, well, maybe I'll explain it another time and I took a long good pull at my beer, wondering if they'd use any of those shots of Francine sitting in my lap with her nice hard ass in that fancy woman's magazine...

38

Then, just like that, the 32 days of shooting were over and it was time for the wrap party.

On the first floor was a long bar, some tables and a large dance floor. There was a stairway that led to an upper floor. Essentially it was the film crew and cast, although all of them weren't there and there were other people that I didn't recognize. There was no live band and most of the music coming over the speakers was disco but the drinks at the bar were real. Sarah and I pushed in. There were two lady bartenders. I had a vodka and Sarah had red wine.

One of the lady bartenders recognized me and brought out one of my books. I signed it.

It was crowded and hot in there, a summer night, no air conditioning.

"Let's get another drink and go upstairs," I suggested to Sarah. "It's too hot down here."

"O.K.," she said.

We made our way up the stairway. It was cooler up there and not so many people. A few people were dancing. As a party it seemed to lack a center but most parties were that way. I started getting depressed. I finished my drink.

"I'm going to get another drink," I told Sarah, "You want one?"

"No, you go ahead…"

I walked down the stairway but before I could get to the bar a fat round fellow, lots of hair, dark shades, grabbed my hand and started shaking it.

"Chinaski, I've read everything you've ever written, everything!"

"Is that right?" I asked.

He kept shaking my hand.

"I got drunk with you one night at Barney's Beanery! Remember me?"

"No."

"You mean you don't remember getting drunk with me at Barney's Beanery?"

"No."

He lifted his shades and perched them on top of his head.

"Now do you remember me?"

"No," I said, pulled my hand away and walked toward the bar.

"Double vodka," I told the lady bartender.

She brought it to me. "I have a girlfriend named Lola," she said. "Do you know a Lola?"

"No."

"She said she was married to you for two years."

"Not true," I said.

I moved from the bar, made my way toward the stairway. Here was another heavy fellow, no hair on his head but a big beard.

"Chinaski," he said.

"Yes?"

"Andre Wells…I had a bit part in the movie…I'm also a writer…I have a novel finished and ready to go. I'd like you to read it. Can I mail you a copy?"

"All right…" I gave him my p.o. box number.

"But don't you have a street address?"

"Of course, but mail it to the box number."

I walked to the stairway. I drank half my drink walking up the stairs. Sarah was talking to a female extra. Then I saw Jon Pinchot. He was standing alone with his drink. I walked over.

"Hank," he said, "I'm surprised to see you here…"

"And I'm surprised that Firepower put up the money for this…"

"They are charging it. . ."

"Oh…Well, what's next?"

"We're in the cutting room now, working on it…After that, we mix in the music…Why don't you come up and see how it's done?”

“When?”

“Anytime. We’re working 12 to 14 hours every day.”

“All right…Listen, whatever happened to Poppy?”

“Who?”

“The one who put up the ten grand while you were living down at the beach.”

“Oh, she’s in Brazil now. We’ll take care of her.”

I finished my drink.

“Aren’t you going to go down and dance?” I asked Jon.

“Oh no, that’s nonsense…”

Then somebody called Jon’s name.

“Excuse me,” he said, “and don’t forget to come to the cutting room!”

“Sure.”

Then Jon was off across the room.

I walked over to the railing and looked down at the bar. While I had been talking to Jon, Jack Bledsoe and his motorcycle buddies had walked in. His buddies leaned against the bar, backs to the bar, facing the crowd. They each held a beerbottle, except for Jack who had a 7-Up. They were dressed in leather jackets, scarves, leather pants, boots.

I walked over to Sarah. “I’m going to go down and see Jack Bledsoe and his gang…You coming?”

“Sure…”

We went on down and Jack introduced us to each of his buddies.

“This is Blackjack Harry…”

“Hi, man…”

“This is The Scourge…”

“Hello there…”

“This is The Nightworm…”

“Hey, hey!”

“This is Dogcatcher…”

“Too much!”

“This is 3-Ball Eddie…”

"God damn…"

"This is FastFart…"

"Pleased to meet ya…"

"And Pussykiller…"

"Yeah "

That was it. They all seemed to be fine fellows but they looked a little on-stage, leaning back against the bar and holding their beerbottles.

"Jack," I said, "you did a great job of acting."

"And how!" said Sarah.

"Thank you…" he flashed his beautiful smile.

"Well," I said, "we're going back upstairs, it's too damned hot down here…Why don't you come up?"

I motioned to the barmaid for refills.

"You going to write another movie script?" Jack asked.

"I don't think so…Too much loss of privacy…I just like to sit around and stare at walls…"

"If you write one, let me see it."

"Sure. Listen, why are your boys facing away from the bar like that? They looking for girls?"

"Naw, they've had too many girls. They are just easing up…"

"All right, see you, Jack…"

"Keep doing your good work," Sarah said.

We went back upstairs. Soon Jack and his gang were gone.

It wasn't much of a night. I kept going up and down the stairway for drinks. After 3 hours, almost everybody was gone. Sarah and I were leaning over the balcony. Then I saw Jon. I had noticed him dancing earlier. I waved him over.

"Hey, whatever happened to Francine? She didn't make the wrap party."

"No, there's no media here tonight…"

"Got it."

"I've got to go now," said Jon. "Have to get up early and go to the cutting room."

"All right…" Then Jon was gone.

It was empty downstairs and it was cooler and so we went down to the bar. Sarah and I were the last ones there. Now there was only one lady bartender.

"We'll have one for the road," I told her.

"I'm supposed to charge you for drinks now," she said.

"How come?"

"Firepower only rented this place until midnight. . . It's ten after 12…But I'll slip you some drinks anyhow because I like your writing so much, but please don't tell anybody that I did it."

"My dear, nobody will ever know."

She poured the drinks. The late disco crowd was beginning to come in. It was time to go. Yes, it was. Our 5 cats were waiting for us. Somehow, I felt sad that the shooting was over. There was something explorative about it. There had been some gamble. We finished our drinks and walked out into the street. The car was still there. I helped Sarah in and got in on the other side. We belted up. I started the car and soon we were on the Harbor Freeway going south. We were moving back toward everyday normalcy and in a way I liked it and in another way I didn't.

Sarah lit a cigarette. "We'll feed the cats and then we'll go to sleep."

"And maybe a drink?" I suggested.

"All right," said Sarah.

Sarah and I got along all right, sometimes.

39

A few days later we went over to the mixing room. Jon Pinchot and the Film Editor Kay Bronstein were busy at it.

Jon pulled up some chairs for us.

"I'll show it to you uncut. It's still very rough, you know. There's a lot of work still to be done…"

"We realize that," said Sarah.

"We want to do justice to your film," said Kay. "I really love it!"

"Thank you," I said.

"We're mixing in the music now," said Jon. "Both Friedman and Fischman are in London working on a new deal. They phone 4 or 5 times a day screaming, 'STOP THE MIX! STOP THE MIX!' I pretend not to understand. We've selected some great music but it's going to cost a lot to obtain the rights. Friedman and Fischman want me to use canned music, which won't cost anything but which is awful. It would ruin the film! So I am mixing the good music in with the soundtrack so they can't take it out later…"

"Have you ever made a movie under these conditions?" I asked.

"No. There is nobody like these two guys. But I love them!"

"You love them?"

"Yes, they are like children. They have heart. Even when they are trying to cut your throat, there is a certain warmth about them. I'd much rather deal with them than with the corporate lawyers who run most of the business in Hollywood."

Jon cut the lights and we watched. It was being shown on a small screen, like a TV set. The credits rolled. Then there was my name. I was a part of Hollywood, if only for a small moment. I was guilty.

It moved along well. I found nothing wrong with it as it went on.

“I like it, I like it,” I said.

“We’ve got something here,” Jon said.

Then there was the scene in which Jack and Francine had just met. They are sitting down at the end of the bar. Jack has brought Francine a couple of drinks. Francine has downed them. Jack is sitting with a half bottle of beer. With his right hand he pushes the beer out of sight, says, That’s it...’ ‘That’s what?’ Francine asks. Jack goes on to explain that he has no more money, he’s broke, can’t buy any more drinks...

“NO! NO!” I yelled. “OH, HOLY CHRIST, NO!”

Jon stopped the film.

“What is it?”

“The alcoholics who see this will laugh us right out of town!”

“What’s wrong?”

“A drinking man would never push a half bottle of beer away and say, ‘That’s it.’ He’d finish the bottle to the last swallow, then say, ‘That’s it...’ “

“Hank’s right,” said Sarah, “I noticed that also...”

“I took 5 shots of that scene and felt that this was the best one...”

“Jon, I felt *affronted* when I saw him push that bottle away, it hurt, it was like getting hit in the face!”

“I think I have a shot where there is only a tiny bit left in the beer bottle...”

“Even a tiny bit is too much but use that one please, if you have it,” I said.

That’s what could happen when you had a director who wasn’t an alcoholic and an actor who hated to drink and they were both working in the same film. And an alcoholic writer who preferred to be at the racetrack rather than at the set.

We watched the remainder of the film.

Jon turned on the lights.

“How’d you like it? I mean, this is very rough, you know “The music and camera work are great,” said Sarah.

“Baby, how about the writing?” I asked.

“Chinaski is as good as ever,” she said.

"Thank you," I said.

"The whole cast and crew were always conscious of you," said Kay, "even when you weren't there."

"Ah," I said.

"But, Hank, what did you think of it?" Jon asked.

"I liked Jack's acting. I felt Francine needed a little more oil in her joints."

"Francine was very good," said Jon. "The film really comes alive when she is on camera."

"Maybe so. Anyhow, I'm glad to be part of this film and part of her great comeback..."

So, to celebrate our good feelings, we locked the cutting room, got into the elevator and got out into the street and into my car and went off to eat. Not Musso's this time but someplace closer, a restaurant about 8 blocks west. It was curious, I thought, the way things got done. It was just one day at a time, day after day and then there it was. In a sense, I felt as if I hadn't yet even written the script. You haven't, some critic might say, as long as you embrace the bad and the obvious in your writing. But what was the difference between a movie critic and the average movie-goer? Answer: the critic didn't have to pay.

"Pull over here," said Jon, "this is the place!"

And I did.

40

I went back to the racetrack. At times I wondered what I was doing out there. And at times I knew. For one, it allowed me to view large numbers of people at their worst, and this kept me in touch with the reality of what humanity consisted of. The greed, the fear, the anger were all there.

There are certain characteristic individuals at every racetrack everywhere, every day. I was probably viewed as one of those characters and I didn't like that. I would have preferred to be invisible. I don't care to hold counsel with the other players. I don't want to discuss horses with them. I don't view the other players with any kind of camaraderie at all. Actually we are playing against each other. The track never has a losing day. The track takes its cut, the state takes its cut, and the cut keeps getting bigger, which means for a player to win consistently he or she must have a decided betting edge, a superior method, a logical insight. The average player plays daily doubles, exactas, triples, pick sixes, or pick nines. They end up with handfuls of useless cardboard. They bet win, they bet place, they bet show. But there is only one bet, and that bet is to *win*. It takes the pressure off. Simplicity is always the secret, to a profound truth, to doing things, to writing, to painting. Life is profound in its simplicity. I think that the racetrack keeps me aware of this.

But, in another sense, the racetrack is a sickness, a fill-in, a cop-out, a substitute for something else that should be faced. Yet, we all need to escape. The hours are long and must be filled somehow until our death. And there's just not enough glory and excitement to go around. Things quickly get drab and deadly. We awaken in the morning, kick our feet out from under the sheets, place them on the floor and think, ah, shit, what now?

At times, I'd get sick with the need for the racetrack. I'd play the thoroughbreds during the day and then at night I'd find myself playing the quarter horses or the harness races, depending on what was available. And there in the evening I'd see some of the same people that I saw during the day. They were betting at night too. The ultimate sickness.

So I went back to the racetrack and forgot all about the movie and the actors and the crew and the cutting room. The track kept my life simple, although maybe "stupid" is a better word for it.

At night I usually watched a bit of TV with Sarah, then went upstairs and played with the poem. The poem was what kept the mind from cracking. The poem was what I needed. Really needed.

I was back into this routine for two or three weeks when the good old phone rang. It was Jon Pinchot.

"The film is finished. We are going to have a private screening at Firepower. No press. No critics. I hope you can be there."

"Sure. Tell me the time and place."

I wrote it down.

It was a Friday night. I well knew my way to the Firepower building. Sarah was smoking and musing about something. As I drove along I began having some thoughts too. I remember something Jon Pinchot had told me. Long before he found anybody to produce the screenplay, he went all around town each night scouting the bars, looking for just the right bar, for the right barflies. He gave himself a name: "Bobby." And he went from bar to bar, night after night. He said he almost became alcoholic. And in all those bars, he said, he never met a woman he'd care to go home with. Sometimes he took a night off and came over to our place with all those photos of the bars he'd visited and put them on the coffee table before me. I'd choose the best ones and he'd say, "Yes, I will concentrate on these…"

He always had faith that the screenplay would become a movie.

The screening room was not at Firepower but in a lot behind it.

We drove up. There was a guard there.

"Firepower screening of *The Dance of Jim Beam*," I told him.

"Go on in...take a right..." he said.

There. We were bigshots. I drove on in, took a right, parked.

It was a lot full of private studios. I had no idea why Firepower didn't have their own screening room. Their building was huge. But they probably had a damned good reason why they did what they did.

We got out and began looking for the screening room. There were no signs. We seemed to be the only ones about. Yet we were on time. We walked on. Then I saw a couple of slim, movie-studio types leaning against a half-open door. Everybody in the business looked nearly the same—I mean the crews, consultants, so forth, they were all between 26 and 38 years old and were slim and were always talking to each other about something interesting.

"Pardon me," I asked, "but is this the screening room for *The Dance of Jim Beam*?"

They both stopped and stared at us as if we had interrupted something important. Then one of them spoke.

"No," he said.

I don't know what will happen to those fellows after they reach 39. Maybe that's what they were talking about.

We walked on looking for the screening room.

Then standing near an automobile with the motor running was somebody familiar. It was Jon Pinchot standing with the co-producer Lance Edwards.

"Jon, for Christ's sake, where's the screening room?"

"Yeah," said Sarah, "where?"

"Oh," said Jon, "they moved the location. I tried to phone you but you had already left..."

"Well, where is it baby?"

"Yeah, baby," said Sarah.

"I was looking for you…Listen, Lance Edwards is driving over there now. All right if we ride with you, Lance?"

Lance nodded as if he was pissed off. I thought that we were the ones who should have been pissed off. In Hollywood those things sometimes get mixed up.

Jon got in front with Lance and Sarah and I got into the back. They claimed Lance was bashful and that's why he wouldn't talk. I had the feeling that he just didn't give a fuck. One of the TV interviewers, the woman from Italy had told me, "I used to work for that son of a bitch! I never met such a cheap bastard! He doesn't pay anything. He doesn't even use his own stationery. He'd use envelopes that people had mailed to him. He'd have me cross out the names and addresses and write new names in and we'd mail the same envelope out again. He'd rip off stamps that weren't cancelled on incoming mail and use them again. One day I was working and I felt his hand on my leg. 'Did you lose something?' I asked him. 'What do you mean?' he asked. 'I mean, did you lose something there on my leg? What are you looking for? If you didn't lose something then take your hand off my fucking leg!' He fired me, without severance pay."

The car kept driving on. It seemed like a very long drive.

"Hey, Lance," I said, "you going to drive us back to our car?"

He nodded as if he were pissed off. Of course he was pissed off: gas expense.

We finally got there, got out and went into the screening room. It was full. Everybody was there. They looked comfortable and at ease. Many of them were holding golden cans of beer.

"Son of a bitch!" I said loudly.

"What is it?" asked Jon.

"All these people have beer! We have NOTHING to drink!"

"Wait! Wait!" said Jon.

He ran off.

Poor Jon.

Sarah and I were being treated like second class citizens. But then, again, what could you expect when the leading man made 750 times as much as the screenplay writer? The public never remembered who wrote the screenplay, just who fucked it up or who made it work, either the director or the actors or whoever. Sarah and I were only slum dwellers.

Jon made it back with two cans of beer for us just as the lights went out and the film came on. *The Dance of Jim Beam*.

I took a gulp of beer in honor of the alcoholics of the world.

And as the film began I flashed back (as they do in the movies) to that morning in the bar when I was young, when I was feeling neither good nor bad, just rather numb, and the bartender said to me: "You know what, kid?"

"No, what?"

"We're gonna put a gas pipe right through the bar here, right here where you sit all the time and we're going to cap it."

"A gas pipe?"

"Yeaji. And so when you feel like ending it all, you can uncap it and take a few whiffs and go..."

"I think that's damned nice of you, Jim," I said.

41

There it was. The film was rolling. I was being beaten up in the alley by the bartender. As I've explained before I had small hands which are a terrible disadvantage in a fist fight. This particular bartender had huge hands. To make matters worse, I took a punch very well which allowed me to absorb much more punishment. I had some luck on my side: I didn't have much fear. The fights with the bartender were a way to pass the time. After all, you just couldn't sit on your barstool all day and all night. And there wasn't much pain in the fight. The pain came the next morning and it wasn't so bad if you had made it back to your room.

And by fighting two or three times a week I was getting better at it. Or the bartender was getting worse.

But that had been over four decades before. Now I was sitting in a Hollywood screening room.

No need to recall the film here. Perhaps it's better to tell about a part left out. Later in the film this lady wants to take care of me. She thinks I'm a genius and wants to shield me from the streets. In the film I don't stay in the lady's house but overnight. But in actual life I stayed about 6 weeks.

The lady, Tully, lived in this large house in the Hollywood Hills. She shared it with another lady, Nadine. Both Tully and Nadine were high-powered executives. They were into the entertainment scene: music, publishing, whatever. They seemed to know everybody and there were two or three parties a week, lots of New York types. I didn't like Tully's parties and entertained myself by getting totally drunk and insulting as many people as I could.

And living with Nadine was a fellow a bit younger than I. He was a composer or a director or something, temporarily out of work. I didn't like him at first. I kept running into him around the house or out on the patio in the morning when we were both hungover. He always wore this damned scarf.

One morning about 11 a.m. we were both out on the patio sucking on beers, trying to recover from our hangovers. His name was Rich. He looked at me.

"You need another beer?"

"Sure...Thank you..."

He went into the kitchen, came back out, handed me my beer, then sat down.

Rich took a good swallow. Then he sighed heavily.

"I don't know how much longer I can fool her..."

"What?"

"I mean, I don't have any talent of any kind. It's all just bullshit."

"Beautiful," I said, "that's really beautiful. I admire you."

"Thank you. How about you?" he asked.

"I type. But that's not the problem."

"What is it?"

"My dick is rubbed raw from fucking. She can't get enough."

"I have to eat Nadine every night."

"Jesus..."

"Hank, we're just a couple of kept men."

"Rich, these liberated women have our balls in a sack."

"I think we should start in on the vodka now," he said.

"Fine," I said.

That evening when our ladies arrived neither of us were able to perform our duties.

Rich lasted another week, then was gone.

After that I often ran into Nadine walking about the house naked, usually when Tully was gone.

"What the hell are you doing?" I finally asked.

"This is my house and if I want to run around with my ass in the wind, that's my business."

"Come on, Nadine, what is it really? You want some turkeyneck?"

"Not if you were the last man on earth."

"If I were the last man on earth you'd have to stand in line."

"You just be glad I don't tell Tully."

"Well, just stop running around with your pussy dangling."

"You pig!"

She ran up the stairway, plop, plop, plop. Big ass. A door slammed somewhere. I didn't follow it up. A totally over-rated commodity.

That night when Tully came home she packed me off to Catalina for a week. I think she knew Nadine was in heat.

That wasn't in the film. You can't put everything in a film.

And then back in the screening room, the film was over. There was applause. We all walked around shaking each other's hands, hugging. We were all great, hell yes.

Then Harry Friedman found me. We hugged, then shook hands.

"Harry," I said, "you've got a winner."

"Yes, yes, a great screenplay! Listen, I heard you've done a novel about prostitutes!"

"Yes."

"I want you to write me a screenplay about that. I want to do it!"

"Sure, Harry, sure..."

Then he saw Francine Bowers and rushed toward her. "Francine, honey doll, you were magnificent!"

Gradually things wound down and the room was almost empty. Sarah and I walked outside.

Lance Edwards and his car were gone. We had the long walk back to our car. It was all right. The night was cool and clear. The movie was finished and would soon be showing. The critics would have their say. I knew that too many movies were made, one after the other after the other. The public saw so many movies that they no longer knew what a movie was and the critics were in the same fix.

Then we were in the car driving back.

"I liked it," said Sarah, "only there were parts…"

"I know. It's not an immortal movie but it's a good one."

"Yes, it is…" Then we were on the freeway. "I'll be glad to see the cats," said Sarah. "Me too…"

"You going to write another screenplay?"

"I hope not…"

"Harry Friedman wants us to come to Cannes, Hank."

"What? And leave the cats?"

"He said to bring the cats."

"No way!"

"That's what I told him."

It had been a good night and there would be others. I cut into the fast lane and went for it.

42

Cannes was another matter. I received a phone call from Pinchot from over there. “We don’t expect to win but we hope we can come close.”

“I think that Jack Bledsoe might get best actor.”

“It is rumored that the French are going to give the Palme d’Or to one of their own.”

Down at Firepower the publicity department kept sending various trade magazines to interview me about the movie. Having broken some cathedral windows in my time, the magazines sensed I was something or somebody they should bait, somebody to get blathering stupid drunk, somebody who could be persuaded to say something stupidly useable. And they got it one stupid night. I said something negative about an actor that I really liked as a person and as an actor. It was a small thing, it described only a small segment of this person. But like his wife told me on the telephone, “It may have been true but you didn’t have to say it.” She was right but in another way she was wrong. We should be free to speak freely especially when we are asked a direct question. But there is the matter of tact. Then there is the matter of too much tact.

Hell, I had been attacked continually over the years but I had somehow found this to be invigorating. I never believed my critics to be anything but assholes. If the world lasts until the next century, I will still be there and the old critics will be dead and forgotten only to be replaced by new critics, new assholes.

So, I was sorry about wounding the actor but maybe actors are just more sensitive than writers. I hope so.

And I stopped giving interviews.

Actually, I would tell anyone who asked that the charge was $1,000 an hour. They would quickly lose interest.

Then Jon Pinchot was on the phone again from Cannes.

"We have problems . , ."

"Like what?"

"Jack Bledsoe won't come out of his hotel room to be interviewed..."

"I can understand that."

"No, wait. . . It's because he won't speak to anybody who didn't give his last movie a good review. Problem is, he didn't get many good reviews for that one. The reporters were all waiting in the lobby and Jack said, 'No, no interviews, you people don't understand me.' A guy held up his hand and said, 'Jack, I gave your last movie a good review!' Jack said, 'All right, then I'll give you an interview.' So they set it up. At a certain cafe, at a certain time. Only problem is, Jack doesn't show up."

"Jon, I guess these actors are more sensitive than writers or directors..."

"Sensitive? Well, you can call it that..."

"How's Francine doing?"

"Fine. Fine. She talks to everybody. She wears these summery dresses. She speaks well of all of us. She knows that she has made a great comeback. She feels that she is the last of the last of the great ones. She walks about like a goddess. It's a great show."

"Yeah. How's Friedman?"

"Oh, he's great! He's everywhere, talking and sweating, waving his arms. He's hated by all the powerful people here. At the same time they fear him because of his tenacity and energy. He disturbs their sleep. They speak of him over their drinks. They want to rip his ass off with their deathrays."

"No chance. Anything else?"

"Just Jack. If we could only get him out of his hotel room. We did finally get him to agree to appear on one of the most popular TV programs in France. He agreed. Then he didn't arrive."

"Why did he go to Cannes at all?"

"Damned if I know..."

The time went by as time will do. The track was still there. Also, I reread some James Thurber. At his best he was wildly funny. It's just a shame he had such an upper-middle-class viewpoint. He would have made one hell of a bad-assed coal miner.

I also knocked out a handful of poems. The poem has some value, believe me. It keeps you from going totally mad.

Yes.

And then, no. The film didn't win anything at Cannes.

And Sarah began planting new flowers and vegetables in the garden.

And our 5 cats watched us with their ten beautiful eyes.

43

After Cannes there was still more work in the cutting room to be done. Pinchot was working hard at it.

I had a small part in the movie. I played a barfly in one scene. It was brief but it could have been longer. They cut most of it out. Let me explain. I am sitting there with these other two fellows, we are at the bar, not sitting together but separately. It's the scene where Jack first meets Francine. The three of us, as barflies, are just supposed to sit there like barflies. Once the camera was on us, though, I couldn't help myself. I took a large gulp of beer, rolled it around in my mouth, then shot it back down into the neck of the beerbottle from a good six inches. An excellent trick. Not a drop fell on the bar. I don't know what made me do it. I had never done it before. But that part ended on the cutting room floor.

"Look, Jon," I said, "why don't you put that part back in?"

"I can't. Everybody would be asking, 4Who the hell is that guy?' "

When you're an extra, you just don't ad-lib.

Anyhow, the time came when there was no more to be done to the film. The date for the release was set.

This particular night about a week before the opening Jon was over at our place and we were sitting around.

"Well, are you going to write us another screenplay? I'm ready when you are."

"No, Jon, I'm afraid of Hollywood. This is it. Or, I certainly hope that this is it."

"What are you going to do now?"

"A novel, I guess."

"About what?"

"You never talk about it first."

"Why not?"

"It lets the air out of the tires."

"Hank is always checking his tire pressure," said Sarah. "He carries this little gauge around with him. To test his novels."

"She's right. . . Listen, Jon, is there going to be a premiere for this film?"

"A premiere? Why, no..."

"No premiere?" asked Sarah. "That's ridiculous!"

"Jon," I said, "I want a premiere!"

"*You* want a premiere? I can't believe this! *Why*?"

"Why? For *laughs*. For bullshit. I want a white stretch limo with a chauffeur, a stock of the best wine, color TV, car phone, cigars..."

"Damned right," said Sarah, "and Francine will love it!"

"Well," said Jon, "I'll see what I can do."

"Tell Friedman it's for publicity purposes," said Sarah. "Tell him it will help the gross."

"I'll work on it..."

"And, Jon," I reminded him, "don't forget the white stretch limo."

Somehow Jon managed it. The night of the premiere came around. Sarah was upstairs getting ready as the white stretch limo came up the drive. The little neighborhood kids had seen it and were already gathering in the yard next door. I went outside and guided the limo up the drive.

"Hank, are you famous?" one of the kids asked.

"Famous? Oh yeah, yeah..."

"Hank, can we come along?"

"You wouldn't like it."

"Yes we would!"

The chauffeur cut the engine and got out.

We shook hands.

"I'm Frank," he said.

"I'm Hank," I said.

"You're the writer?"

"Yes. Have you read my stuff?"

“No.”

“Well, I haven’t seen you drive either.”

“Oh yes, you have, sir. You just saw me drive up the driveway.”

“That’s right, isn’t it? Listen, my wife is still getting dressed. It won’t be long.”

“What do you write, sir?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean just that, sir. What do you write?”

The fellow was beginning to piss me off a little. I wasn’t used to chauffeurs.

“Well, I write poems, short stories, novels....”

“And you wrote a screenplay, sir.”

“Oh. That. Yes.”

“What do you write about, sir?”

“About?”

“Yes, about. . .”

“Oh, haha, I write about life, you know. Just life, you know.”

“My mom,” one of the kids said, sticking his head over the fence, “says he writes dirty stuff!”

The chauffeur looked at me. “Please tell your wife that it’s a long drive. We mustn’t be late.”

“Says who?”

“Mr. Friedman.”

I walked into the house and yelled up the stairway.

“Sarah, the limo is here, hurry...”

“He’s early...”

“I know. But it’s Friday night and it’s a long trip.”

“I’ll be down in a moment. Don’t worry. We’ll make it.”

I cracked a beer and turned on the TV. There was a fight on ESPN. They were really slugging it out. The fighters were better conditioned now than in my youth. I marveled at the energy they could expend and still keep going and going. The months of roadwork and gymwork that fighters had to endure seemed almost intolerable. And then, those last two or three intense days before a big fight. Condition was the key. Talent and guts were a must but without condition they were negated.

I liked to watch the fights. Somehow it reminded me of writing. You needed the same thing, talent, guts and condition. Only the condition was mental, spiritual. You were never a writer. You had to become a writer each time you sat down to the machine. It wasn't that hard once you sat down in front of the machine. What was hard sometimes was finding that chair and sitting in it. Sometimes you couldn't sit in it. Like everybody else in the world, for you, things got in the way: small troubles, big troubles, continuous slammings and hangings. You had to be in condition to endure what was trying to kill you. That's the message I got from watching the fights, or watching the horses run, or the way the jocks kept overcoming bad luck, spills on the track and personal little horrors off the track. I wrote about life, haha. But what really astonished me was the immense courage of some of the people *living* that life. That kept me going.

Sarah came down the stairway. She looked great.

"Let's go!"

I snapped off the TV. Then we were out the door.

I introduced Sarah to the chauffeur.

"Sarah! Sarah! Sarah!" the kids screamed. The kids liked Sarah.

"Can we go with you, Sarah?"

"You'll have to ask your mothers," she laughed.

Mothers? Didn't anybody ever ask the fathers?

The chauffeur helped us into the back. The limo slowly backed out with the kids following along the fence. Hell, I'd soon be dead and someday about half of them would be sitting down to word processors and writing unimaginably bad' shit.

We drove down the steep hill and I got the cork out of the first bottle of wine. I poured two tall glassfulls.

"Here's mud in your eye," I said to Sarah, clicking our glasses.

"Here's mud in both of our eyes," she said.

I turned on the TV. It didn't have ESPN. I shut it off.

"Do you know how to get there?" Sarah asked the chauffeur.

"Oh yes…"

Sarah looked at me. “Did you ever think you’d be taking a limo to the premiere of a movie that you had written?”

“Never. I’m just glad I got off of that park bench.”

“I like limos. Don’t you like the way they ride?”

“They glide. We’re on a glider to hell. Here, let me give you another drink.”

“Great wine…”

“Oh yes…”

We went up the Harbor freeway north and then we cut onto the San Diego freeway north. I hated the San Diego freeway. It always jammed. Then I noticed a slight rain beginning to fall.

“That’s it,” I said, “it’s beginning to rain.” All the cars were going to stop. California drivers didn’t know how to drive in the rain. They drove too fast or too slow. Most of them drove too slow.

“We’re going to be late,” Sarah said.

“I think so, kid.”

Then it really started to come down. Terror filled the other drivers on the freeway. They peered through their flipping wipers with their tiny soulless eyes. The fuckers should be glad they had wipers. Once I had an old car without them. You want to know about hard driving? Try that. In rainy weather I carried a sliced potato with me. I’d stop the car, clean off the windshield with the potato and drive on. You had to know how to do it: just a very light rub.

But these drivers, now, in their cars, acted as if they were practically on their death beds. You could feel their panic in the downpour of rain. Dumb panic. Useless panic. Wasted panic. You ever want to use your panic, save it for something real.

“Well, baby, we have plenty of wine.”

I poured a bit more.

But I had to allow the chauffeur a bit of credit. He was a pro. He seemed to know which lane would slow down and which would soon move and he slid that limo, that large large limo gently back and forth between lanes, getting all the best of the flow. I almost forgave him for not being one of my readers. I loved professionals who could do what they were supposed to be able to do. They were rare. There were so many inefficient professionals: doctors, lawyers, presidents, plumbers, quarterbacks, dentists, policemen, airline pilots and etc.

“I think we’re going to make it,” I told him.

“We might,” he admitted.

“Who’s your favorite writer?” I asked.

“Shakespeare.”

“If we make it, I’ll forgive you.”

“If we make it, I’ll forgive myself.”

I just couldn’t engage in conversaton with that mother. He put the stopper to me each time.

Sarah and I just sipped our wine.

And then we were there. The chauffeur pulled up and opened the door. We got out.

It was at the edge of a large shopping mall. The theatre was back in there somewhere.

“Thank you, Frank,” I said.

“You’re welcome. I’m going to park now. I’ll find you when you come out.”

“How can you find us?”

“I’ll find you...”

Then he was in the driver’s seat and the white stretch limo was gone into traffic. The rain was still falling.

I looked and there were 4 or 5 men with umbrellas waiting for us. It was the open part of the mall and some of the rain drifted in. The men with the umbrellas rushed toward us, looking very very concerned that we might get wet.

I laughed. “This is ridiculous!”

“I like it!” Sarah laughed.

We all rushed toward each other. Then we moved into the mall. There were cameras flashing. Big time. I had left the park bench behind.

44

I said to one of the men as we walked along, “God damn it, we left our wine bottle in the car! We are going to need a couple of bottles of wine for the movie!”

“I’ll get them for you, Mr. Chinaski,” the man said. I had no idea who he was. He broke away from the group.

“And don’t forget a corkscrew!” I yelled after him.

We moved further into the mall. Far over to our left I could see flashbulbs popping. Then I saw Francine Bowers. She was posing, looking first this way, then that. She was regal. The best of the last.

We followed the men. Then there was a TV camera. More flashbulbs. I recognized the lady as one of the interviewers on an entertainment station.

“Henry Chinaski,” she greeted me.

“How do you do,” I bowed.

Then before she could ask any questions, I said, “We are worried. We left our wine in the limo. The chauffeur is probably drinking it right now. We need more wine.”

“As the screenwriter, do you like the way the movie turned out?”

“The director handled two difficult actors, the leads, without any problem at all. We used real barflies, none of whom are able to make it out here tonight. The camera work is great and the screenplay is well written.”

“Is this the story of your life?”

“A few days out of a ten year period...”

“Thank you, Mr. Chinaski, for speaking to us...”

“Sure...”

Then Jon Pinchot was there. “Hello, Sarah, hello, Hank...Follow me...”

There was a small group with cassette recorders. Some flashbulbs went off. I didn't know who they were. They began asking questions.

"Do you think drinking should be glorified?"

"No more than anything else..."

"Isn't drinking a disease?"

"Breathing is a disease."

"Don't you find drunks obnoxious?"

"Yes, most of them are. So are most teetotalers."

"But who would be interested in the life of a drunk?"

"Another drunk."

"Do you consider heavy drinking to be socially acceptable?"

"In Beverly Hills, yes. On skid row, no."

"Have you 'gone Hollywood'?"

"I don't think so."

"Why did you write this movie?"

"When I write something I never think about why."

"Who is your favorite male actor?"

"Don't have any."

"Female."

"Same answer."

Jon Pinchot tugged at my sleeve.

"We'd better go. I think the movie is about to begin..."

Sarah and I followed him. We were rushed along. Then we were at the theatre. Everybody seemed to be inside.

Then there was the voice behind us: "WAIT!"

It was the man who had gone for the wine. He had a large paper bag. He ran up and thrust it into my arms.

"You are one of the world's great men!" I told him.

He just turned and ran off.

"Who was that?" I asked Jon. "Does he work for Firepower?"

"I don't know..."

"Come on," said Sarah, "we better go in."

We followed Jon into the lobby. The doors were already closed. Jon pushed them open. It was dark and we followed him down the aisle. The movie had already begun.

"Shit," I said, "couldn't they have waited for us? We are the writers!"

"Follow me," said Jon, "I saved you two seats."

We followed him all the way down to the first row, side aisle. There were two seats up against the wall.

"I'll see you later," said Jon.

There were two girls seated in our same aisle. One of them said to the other, "I don't know what we are doing here. I really hate Henry Chinaski. He's a disgusting human being!"

I fumbled in the dark for one of the wine bottles and an opener. The screen went from dark to light.

"Henry Chinaski," the girl went on, "hates women, he hates children, he's a creepy bitter old fuck, I don't see what people see in him!"

The other girl saw me in the light of the screen and dug her friend in the ribs with her elbow.

"Shhhh...I think that's him!"

I opened one bottle for Sarah and one for me. We each lifted them high. Then Sarah said, "I ought to beat up those cunts!"

"Don't," I said, "my enemies are the source of half my income. They hate me so much that it becomes a subliminal love affair."

We were in a terrible position to view the movie. From where we sat, all the bodies were tall, elongated and thin, and the heads were the worst. Large and misshapen, big foreheads, and yet as big as the foreheads were there seemed to be almost no eyes or mouths or chins to the heads. Also the sound was too loud and badly distorted. The dialog sounded like, " WHOOO, WOOOO, WULD WAFT TA KRISTOL, YO TO YO..."

The premiere of my first and only movie and I couldn't make anything out of it.

I was later to find out that there was another theatre right next door showing our movie at exactly the same time and that it was only half-full.

"Jon didn't plan this very well," Sarah suggested.

"Well, we'll see it on video cassette someday," I told her.

"Yeah," she said.

And we lifted our bottles in unison.

The girls watched us in total fascination and disgust.

The oversized heads with big foreheads kept moving around on the screen.

And the heads spoke loudly to each other.

"FLAM FLAM WOOL WO, TAKA BRAK VO SO…"

"YA DOL YA, TEK TA TAM, YA VO DO…"

"PREEBERS…"

"BRAKA DAM…"

"They fucked over my dialogue, Sarah."

"Uh…yeah…"

But it was best when the big tall foreheads went for the very tall thin drinks, the drink filled half the screen, and then the drink went somewhere in, under the forehead, and then it was gone, and then there were just undulating empty glasses, changing shape, stretching and contracting, glistening empty glasses from hades. What hangovers those foreheads would have.

Finally, Sarah and I stopped watching the screen and just worked on our wine bottles.

And, with time, the movie ended.

There was some applause and then we waited for the audience to file out. We waited for a good while. Then we got up and went out.

There were more flashbulbs in the lobby. Handshakes. We ducked that.

We needed the restrooms.

"See you by the potted plant across from the ladies room," I told Sarah.

I made it to the men's room. In the urinal next to me was a swaying drunk. He looked over.

"Hey, you're Henry Chinaski, aren't ya?"

"No, I'm his brother, Donny."

The drunk swayed some more, pissing away.

"Chinaski never wrote about no brother."

"He hates me, that's why."

"How come?"

"Because I've kicked his ass about 60 or 70 times."

The drunk didn't know what to think about that. He just kept pissing and swaying. I went over, washed up, got out of there.

I waited by the potted plant. The chauffeur stepped out from behind it.

"I've been instructed to take you to the celebration party."

"Great, "I said, "as soon as Sarah…"

And there was Sarah. "You know, baby, most chauffeurs wait outside but our man, Frank, he came inside and found us. But he took off his cap so as not to look like a chauffeur."

"It's been a strange night," she said.

We followed Frank through the mall. He was about two steps ahead.

"You didn't drink our wine, did you, Frank?"

"No, sir…"

"Frank, isn't the first rule for a chauffeur never to leave his limo? Suppose somebody stole the limo, for instance?"

"Sir, nobody would ever steal that piece of crap."

"You're right."

As soon as we stepped outside of the mall, Frank put his cap back on. The limo was parked right at the curb.

He helped us into the back seat and we were off.

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The post-premiere party was at Copperfield's on La Brea Avenue. Frank pulled up in front, let us out and we moved toward the entrance to more flashbulbs. I got the idea that they didn't know who they were photographing. As long as you got out of a limo you qualified.

We were recognized at the entrance and were let inside to a crowd of people, closely packed in and all holding glasses of red wine in their hands. They stood in groups of 3 or 4 or more, talking or not talking. There was no air conditioning and although it was cool outside, it was hot in there, very hot. There were just too many people sucking in the oxygen.

Sarah and I got our wine and stood there, trying to get it down. The wine was very abrasive. There is nothing worse than cheap red wine unless it's cheap white wine that has been allowed to get warm.

"Who are all these people, Sarah? What do they want here?"

"Some are in the business, some are on the edge of the business and some are just here because they can't think of anyplace else to be."

"What are they doing?"

"Some are trying to make contacts, others are trying to stay in contact. Some go to every function like this that they are able to. Also there's a smattering of the press."

The feeling in the air was not good. It was joyless. These were the survivors, the scramblers, the sharks, the cheapies. The lost souls chatted away and it was hot, hot, hot.

Then a man in an expensive suit came up. "Aren't you Mr. and Mrs. Chinaski?"

"Yes," I said.

"You don't belong down here. You belong upstairs. Follow me.

We followed him.

We followed him up a stairway and to the second floor. It was not quite as crowded. The man in the expensive suit turned and faced us.

"You mustn't drink the wine they are serving here. I will get you your own bottle."

"Thanks. Make it two."

"Of course. I'll be right back..."

"Hank, what does all this mean?"

"Accept it. It will never happen again."

I looked at the crowd. I got the same feeling from them as I got from the crowd downstairs.

"I wonder who that guy is?" I asked.

Then he was back with two bottles of good wine and a corkscrew, plus fresh wine glasses.

"Thank you much," I said.

"You're welcome," he said. "I used to read your column in the *L.A. Free Press*."

"You don't look that old."

"I'm not. My dad was a hippie. I read the paper after he was done with it."

"Can I ask your name?"

"Carl Wilson. I own this place."

"Oh, I see. Well, thank you again for the good wine."

"You're welcome. Let me know if you need more."

"Sure."

Then he was gone. I opened a bottle and poured two glasses. We gave it a try. Really good wine.

"Now," I asked Sarah, "who are these people up here? How are they different than the ones downstairs?"

"They are the same. They just have more pull, better luck. Money, politics, family. Those in the industry bring in their family and friends.

Ability and talent are secondary. I know I sound like I'm on a soapbox but that's the way it is."

"It adds up. Even the so-called best movies seem very bad to me."

"You'd rather watch a horse race."

"Of course. . ."

Then Jon Pinchot walked up.

"My god! These people! I feel like I've been covered with shit!" I laughed.

Then Francine Bowers came over. She was elated. She had made her comeback.

"You were good, Francine," I said.

"Yes," said Jon.

"You let your hair down," said Sarah.

"Maybe too much?"

"Not at all," I said.

"Hey," said Francine, "what's that wine you're drinking? It looks like good stuff."

"Have some," I tilted the bottle into her glass.

"Me too," said Jon.

"How come you get his good stuff?" Francine asked.

"The owner's father was a hippie. They both read the *L.A. Free Press*. I used to write a column, 'Notes of a Neanderthal Man.' "

Then we all stood there not saying anything. There was nothing more to say. The movie was finished.

"Where's Jack Bledsoe?" I asked.

"Oh," said Jon, "he doesn't come to these things."

"Well, I do," said Francine.

"We do too," Sarah admitted.

Then there was some beckoning from another group.

"A magazine wants to interview you, Francine. *Movie Mirror*."

"Of course," said Francine. "Forgive me," she said to us.

"Sure."

She walked over, stately and proud. I felt good for her. I felt good for anybody who made a comeback after being relegated to the hinterlands.

"You go over there with her, Jon," said Sarah. "She'll feel better..."

"Should I go too, Sarah?"

"No, Hank, you'll only try to hog the interview. And remember, you charge $1,000 now."

"That's right..."

"All right," said Jon, "I'll go over there."

Then he was gone, over there.

A young man walked up with a tape recorder. "I'm from the *Herald Examiner*. I do the '*Talk and Tell*' column. How did you like the way the movie came out?"

"Do you have a thousand dollars?" Sarah asked.

"Sarah, this is just chit-chat, it's all right."

"Well, how did you like the way the movie turned out?"

"It's a better than average movie. Long after this year's Academy Award movies are forgotten, *The Dance of Jim Beam* will be showing up now and then in the Art houses. And it will pop up on TV from time to time, if the world lasts."

"You really think so?"

"Yes. And as it's viewed again and again special meanings will be found in the lines and scenes that weren't intended by anyone. Overpraise and underpraise is the norm in our society."

"Do barflies talk like that?"

"Some of them do until somebody kills them."

"You seem to rate this movie pretty high."

"It's not that good. It's only that the others are so bad."

"What do you consider to be the greatest movie that you have ever seen?"

"*Eraserhead*."

"*Eraserhead*?"

"Yes."

"And what's next on your list?"

"*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*?"

Then Carl Wilson was back. "Chinaski, there's a guy downstairs who claims he knows you. He wants to come up. One John Gait."

"Let him up here, please."

"Well, thank you, Chinaski," said the *Herald-Examiner* man.

"You're welcome."

I uncorked the second bottle and poured us a couple more. Sarah held her booze remarkably well. She only became talkative when we were alone together. And then she talked good sense, mostly.

Then, there he was John Gait. Big John Gait. He walked up.

"Hank and I never shake hands," he smiled. "Hello, Sarah," he said, "got this guy under control?"

"Yes, John."

Damn, I thought, I know so many guys named John.

The biblical names hung on. John, Mark, Peter, Paul.

Big John Gait looked good. His eyes had gotten kinder. Kindness came finally to the better ones. There was less self-interest. Less fear. Less competitive gamesmanship.

"You're looking good, baby," I told him.

"You look better now than you did 25 years ago," he said.

"Better booze, John."

"It's the vitamins and health foods," said Sarah. "No red meat, no salt, no sugar."

"If this ever gets out my book sales are going to plummet, John."

"Your stuff will always sell, Hank. A child can read it."

Big John Gait. God damn, what a life-saver he had been. Working for the post office, I had gone over to his place instead of eating or sleeping or doing all the other things. Big John was always there. A lady supported him. The ladies always supported Big John. "Hank, when I work, I'm not happy. I want to be happy," he would say.

There was always this big bowl of speed sitting on the coffeetable between us. It was usually filled to the brim with pills and capsules. "Have some."

I would dip in and eat them like candy. "John, this shit is going to destroy your brain."

"Each man is different, Hank, what destroys one doesn't affect another."

Marvelous nights of bullshit. I brought my own beer and popped the pills. John was the best-read man I had ever met, but not pedantic. But he was odd. Maybe it was the speed.

Sometimes at 3 or 4 a.m. he'd get the urge to raid garbage cans and backyards. I'd go with him. "I *want* this."

"Shit, John, it's just an old left boot somebody threw away."

"I want it."

His whole house was filled with trash. Piles of it everywhere. When you wanted to sit on the couch you'd have to push a mound of trash to one side. And his walls were pasted over with mottos and odd newspaper headlines. All the stuff was way off key. Like the last words of the earth's last maniac. In the cellar of his house were thousands of books stacked up and they were swollen and wet and rotted with the damp. He had read them all and come away quite well. All he needed to survive was a shoestring and you'd better not get in a chess game with him, or a struggle to the death. He was a marvel. I do suppose in those days I had a fair amount of self-pity and he made me aware of that. Mainly, those times and those hours were entertaining. I fed off of Big John Gait when there was nothing else around. He was a writer too. And later I got lucky with the word and he didn't. He could write a very powerful poem but in between times there were spaces where he just seemed vacant. He explained it to me, "I don't want to be famous, I just want to feel good." He was one of the best readers of poetry, his or anybody else's, that I had ever heard. He was a beautiful man. And later, after my luck, when I'd mention Big John Gait here and there, I'd get the same feedback, "I don't see what Chinaski sees in that old blow-hard." Those who had accepted me and my work wouldn't accept him and his work and I wondered if maybe my writing was made for fools? Which I couldn't help. A bird flies, a snake crawls, I change typewriter ribbons.

Anyhow, it felt good seeing John Gait once again. He had a new lady with him. "This is Lisa," he said. "She writes poetry too." Lisa jumped right in and began talking. She talked up a storm and John just stood there. Maybe it was an off night for her but she sounded like an old time Female Libber. Which is all right, for them, except they tend to eat up the oxygen and it was already too hot in there for lack of fresh air. She went on and on, telling us everything. John and she often read together. Did I ever hear of Babs Danish? "No," I told her. Well, Babs Danish was black and she was *female* and when she read she wore big earrings and she was very passionate and the earrings jumped up and down and her brother Tip provided a musical backdrop for her readings. I should hear her.

"Hank doesn't go to poetry readings," Sarah said, "but I've heard Babs Danish and I like her very much."

"John and I and Babs are reading at Beyond Baroque next Wednesday night, will you come?"

"I probably will," said Sarah. And she probably would.

I took a long look at John Gait then. He looked gentle and good but I saw a deep pain in his eyes that I had never seen before. For a man who had wanted to be happy he looked like a man who had lost two pawns in the early rounds of a chess match without gaining an advantage.

Then the *Herald Examiner* man was back.

"Mr. Chinaski," he said, "I wanted to ask you another question."

I introduced him to John Gait and Lisa.

"John Gait," I said, "is the great undiscovered poet in America. This man helped me to go on when all else said stop. I want you to interview John Gait."

"Well, Mr. Gait?"

"Hank and I knew each other maybe 20 years ago..."

Sarah and I drifted off.

"Looks like with Lisa John's got a full nine innings on his hands," I said.

"Maybe it's good for him."

"Maybe."

More people had come upstairs. It seemed that nobody had left. What was there? Contacts? Opportunities? Was it worth it? Wasn't it better not to be in show business? No, no. Who wants to be a gardener or a taxi driver? Who wants to be a tax accountant? Weren't we all artists? Weren't our minds better than that? Better to suffer this way rather than the other. At least it looks better.

Our second bottle was almost empty.

Then Jon Pinchot returned.

"Jack Bledsoe is here. He wants to see you."

"Where is he?"

"He's over there, by the doorway."

And sure enough, there was Jack Bledsoe, just leaning in the doorway with his famous and sensitive smile.

Sarah and I walked over. I reached out and Jack and I shook hands.

I thought of John Gait's saying, "Hank and I never shake hands."

"Good show, Jack, great acting. I'm really glad you were aboard."

"Did I put it over?"

"I think you did."

"I didn't want to get too much of your voice in there or too much of your slouch..."

"You didn't."

"I just wanted to come by to say hello to you."

That one struck me. I didn't know how to react.

"Well, hell, baby, we can get drunk together anytime."

"I don't drink."

"Oh, yeah...Well, thank you, Jack, glad you came by. How about one for the road anyhow?"

"No, I'm going..."

Then he turned and walked down the stairway.

He was alone. No bodyguards, no bikers. Nice kid, nice smile.

Goodbye, Jack Bledsoe.

I wormed another bottle out of Carl Wilson and Sarah and I stood around with the other people but actually nothing was occurring. Just people standing around. Maybe they were waiting for me to get drunk and insane and abusive like I sometimes did at parties. But I doubted that. They were just dull inside. There was nothing for them to do but stay within the self that was not quite there. That wasn't too painful. It was a soft place to be.

With me, my main vision for life was to avoid as many people as possible. The less people I saw the better I felt. I met one other man, once, who shared my philosophy, Sam the Whorehouse Man. He lived in the court behind mine in East Hollywood. He was on ATD.

"Hank," he told me, "when I was doing time, I was always in trouble. The warden kept throwing me in the hole. But I *liked* the hole. The warden would come around and lift the lid and look in, and he asked me one time, 'HAVE YOU HAD ENOUGH? ARE YOU READY TO COME OUT OF THERE?' I took a piece of my shit and threw it up and hit him in the face. He closed the lid and left me down there. I just stayed in there. When the warden came back he didn't lift the lid all the way. 'WELL, HAVE YOU HAD ENOUGH YET?' 'NOT AT ALL,' I yelled back. Finally the warden had me pulled out of there. 'HE ENJOYS IT TOO MUCH,' he told the guards. 'GET HIS ASS OUT OF THERE!' "

Sam was a great guy, then he got to gambling. He couldn't pay his rent, he was always in Gardena, he slept in the crappers there and began gambling again as soon as he woke up. Finally Sam got tossed out of his apartment. I traced him to a tiny room down in the Korean district. He was sitting in a corner.

"Hank, all I can do is drink milk but it comes right up. But the doctors say there is nothing wrong with me."

Two weeks later he was dead. This man who shared my philosophy about people.

"Listen," I said to Sarah, "there's nothing happening here. This is death. Let's leave."

"We have all the free drinks we want..."

"It's not worth it."

"But the night is young, maybe something will happen."

"Not unless I make it happen and I'm not in the mood."

"Let's wait just a little while…"

I knew what she meant. For us it was the end of Hollywood. All in all, she cared more for that world than I did. Not much, but some. She had begun studying to be an actor.

Still it was just people standing, that's all. The women weren't beautiful and the men weren't interesting. It was duller than dull. The dullness actually hurt.

"I'm going to crack unless we get out of here," I told Sarah.

"All right," she said, "let's leave."

Good old Frank was downstairs with the limo. "You're leaving early," he said. "Uh huh," I said.

Frank placed us in the back and we found a new bottle of wine in the limo. We uncorked it as our trusty man found the Harbor Freeway south.

"Hey, Frank, want a drink?"

"Sure as shit, man!"

He hit a button and the little glass partition dropped. I slipped the bottle through.

As Frank drove the limo along he took a hit from the wine bottle. I don't know but somehow it all looked very strange and funny and Sarah and I started laughing.

At last, the night was alive.

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After that, not much. The movie opened in 3 or 4 theatres in town. People began bothering me at the racetrack.

“Did you write that movie?”

“Yes.”

“I thought you were a horseplayer.”

“I am. Now, if you will excuse me…”

Some people had a nice way of approaching. Others were terrors. They saw you and their eyes widened and then came the rush toward you. I learned to recognize that look and when I saw it I would duck down some side aisle, make a quick turn. I’m sure that I ran away from a lot of people who had no intention of bothering me. I knew in time that things would get back to normal and that once again I’d just be another old guy at the track like all the other old guys.

The reviews of *The Dance of Jim Beam* were both good and bad. *The New York Times* gave it a wondrous review but *Jim Beam* upset the lady at *The New Yorker*. Rick Talbot said it was one of the ten best movies of the year.

Then there were odd moments. One night I was upstairs and Sarah hollered up, “They are reviewing *The Dance of Jim Beam*\”

It was Wexler and Selby on a cable station. When I arrived they were showing the shot where Jack Bledsoe is throwing Francine Bowers’s clothing out of their 6th floor window. Then the shot ended.

Selby shook his head and limp-wristed the movie away: “AWFUL! TERRIBLE! This has to be the *worst* movie of the year! Here we have this…*bum*…with his pants down around his ankles! He’s filthy, uncaring…obnoxious! All he wants to do is beat up the bartender! From time to time he writes poems on torn pieces of paper! But mostly we see this scum-bag…sucking on bottles of wine or begging for drinks at the bar! In one bar scene we see two ladies fighting to their very *death* over him. Impossible! NOBODY, NOBODY would ever care for this man! Who could care for him? We rate movies from one to ten here. Is there any way I can give this a minus one?"

Sure enough, up on the screen appeared a minus one.

Then Wexler started. "I agree with your view but I give it a two. I think there was one funny scene, where he takes a bath in the tub with the dog."

"Oh no," said Selby, "that was stupid…"

After a month the movie was still playing at 3 or 4 theatres. Then it opened in a theatre near San Pedro and we decided to go see it. After all, we had never seen it on a large screen except the time of the premiere and the huge elongated heads.

We drove to a small mall and parked where we could see the theatre. And on the marquee were the words, *The Dance of Jim Beam*. That was a thrill, seeing that.

I had seen most of my movies as a kid, all very horrible movies. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Jeanette McDonald and Nelson Eddy. Bob Hope. Tyrone Power. The Three Stooges. Cary Grant. Those movies shook and rattled your brains, left you without hope or energy. I sat in those movie houses, sickened in the gut and soul.

We sat in the parking lot and waited for the end of the afternoon showing.

"Maybe nobody is in there," I said. "Maybe nobody will come out."

"They're in there, Hank…"

We waited. Then the movie was over and they started coming out.

"There's 3," said Sarah.

"5," I said.

"8."

"Eleven…"

I felt better. They kept coming. I gave up counting.

Then they were all out of there. It would soon be time for the early evening show.

“Do you think anybody else does this, Sarah?”

“What?”

“This sitting and watching to see how many people are going in and out of your movie?”

“I’m sure we’re not the first.”

More time went by.

“Where are the people?” I asked. “Maybe nobody’s coming!”

“They’ll be here.”

Just then, sure enough, old model cars began pulling in, circling, looking for places to park. One guy got out with a wine bottle in a paper sack.

“The drunks are coming to check for accuracy,” I laughed.

“They’ll find it,” said my dear wife.

“As a historian of drink I don’t have a peer.”

“That’s because none of them have lived as long as you. What’s your’secret?”

“Never get out of bed before noon.”

It looked like a fair crowd going in. We walked on over to the theatre. I stood at the ticket booth. “Two,” I told the girl, “one senior.”

Then the fellow took our tickets, ripped them and we walked in. Coming attractions were playing full volume. We got two seats to the side but far back, and waited. There seemed to be at least 100 people in there.

Then, at the last moment, two young people, male and female, mid-twenties, tall and slender, took the seats in front of us.

The coming attractions were over and then there was *The Dance of Jim Beam*. The credits appeared. And the movie began. I had seen it on video 3 or 4 times and had it fairly well memorized. Ah, it was the story of my life. Who else could jam it down their throats like that? But actually, it wasn’t meant to be that self-concerned. I only wanted to show what strange and desperate lives some drunks live and I was the one drunk I knew best.

I had been preceded by some good drinkers. Eugene O’Neill, Faulkner, Hemingway, Jack London. The booze loosened those typewriter keys, gave them some spark and gamble.

The movie ran on.

"Do you think anybody knows that you're here?" Sarah asked.

"No, I look pretty much like anybody else."

"Does that bother you?"

"Yes, I don't like to look like anybody else."

The tall slender male in front of us turned and said, "Please, I'd like to watch the movie."

"I'm sorry," I said.

The movie continued. Then there was a sudden indecency and the girl in front of us winced and said, "Oh no."

"It's all right, Darlene," said her tall companion.

Darlene got over that and then there was a simple scene where a lady in the bar is bragging about how she gives the best head in town. The lady says, "Nobody in this town can swallow paste like I can!"

Darlene covered her face and said, "I can't believe it..."

"It's all right, honey," said her male cohort.

Darlene continued her face-covering act throughout the movie but neither Darlene or her boyfriend left.

Then the movie was over and the people slowly left their seats. We waited. Well, I had seen a lot worse movies, especially in the thirties.

Sarah and I got up and moved up the aisle toward the exit. We walked to the car, sat there watching them pull out. I rolled down the windows and we had a smoke.

Then an old car drove slowly past in front of us. In it was a single man. He saw us and began waving. He had a crazy smile upon his face. I waved back, then he was gone.

"He spotted you," said Sarah.

"Yes, that was funny."

"Yeah."

We drove back home just like from any other movie.

We got back to the place and I opened a bottle of good red wine. The blood of the gods.

The news was on TV. The news was bad.

We sat and drank and watched TV until Johnny Carson came on. There he was, perfectly clothed. His hand kept darting to the knot of his necktie, he was subconsciously worried about his appearance. Johnny went into his monologue and Ed's booming false laughter could be heard from the sidelines. It paid well.

"What are you going to do now?" Sarah asked.

"About what?"

"I mean, the movie is really over."

"Oh, yes."

"What will you do?"

"There are the horses."

"Besides the horses."

"Oh, hell, I'll write a novel about writing the screenplay and making the movie."

"Sure, I guess you can do that."

"I can, I think."

"What are you going to call it?"

"*Hollywood*."

"*Hollywood*!"

"Yes…"

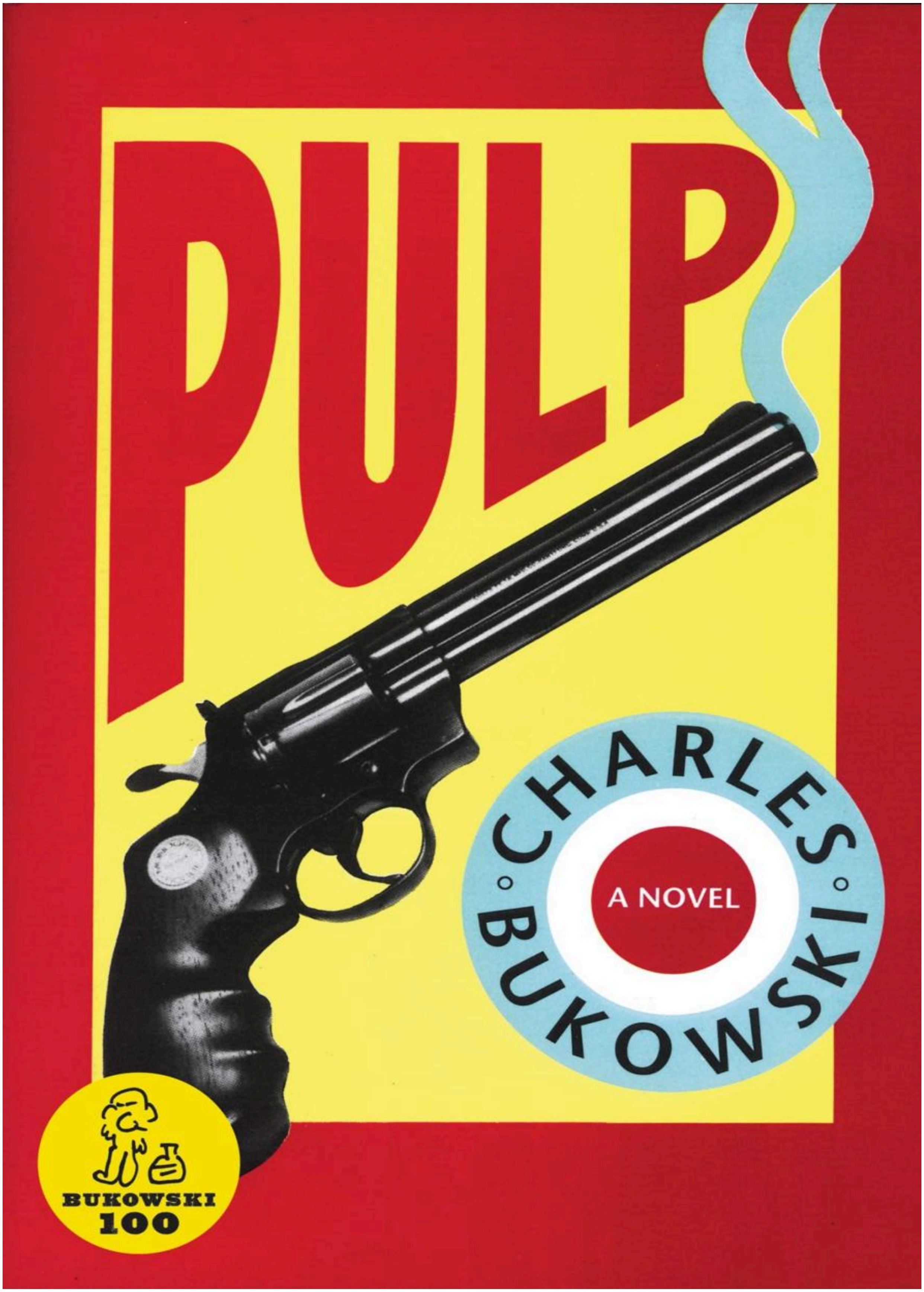
And this is it.

Photo: Michael Montfort

CHARLES BUKOWSKI is one of America's best-known contemporary writers of poetry and prose, and, many would claim, its most influential and imitated poet. He was born in Andernach, Germany, to an American soldier father and a German mother in 1920, and brought to the United States at the age of three. He was raised in Los Angeles and lived there for fifty years. He published his first story in 1944 when he was twenty-four and began writing poetry at the age of thirty-five. He died in San Pedro, California, on March 9, 1994, at the age of seventy-three, shortly after completing his last novel, *Pulp* (1994).

During his lifetime he published more than forty-five books of poetry and prose, including the novels *Post Office* (1971), *Factotum* (1975), *Women* (1978), *Ham on Rye* (1982), and *Hollywood* (1989). His most recent books are the posthumous editions of *What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire: New Poems* (1999), *Open All Night: New Poems* (2000), *Beerspit Night and Cursing: The Correspondence of Charles Bukowski and Sheri Martinelli 1960-1967* (2001), and *The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps: New Poems* (2001).

All of his books have now been published in translation in over a dozen languages and his worldwide popularity remains undiminished. In the years to come, Ecco will publish additional volumes of previously uncollected poetry and letters.



PULP

CHARLES BUKOWSKI

A NOVEL

BUKOWSKI
100

CHARLES BUKOWSKI
PULP

HarperCollins e-books

Dedicated to bad writing

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1

I was sitting in my office, my lease had expired and McKelvey was starting eviction proceedings. It was a hellish hot day and the air conditioner was broken. A fly crawled across the top of my desk. I reached out with the open palm of my hand and sent him out of the game. I wiped my hand on my right pants leg as the phone rang.

I picked it up. “Ah yes,” I said.

“Do you read Celine?” a female voice asked. Her voice sounded quite sexy. I had been lonely for some time. Decades.

“Celine,” I said, “ummm…”

“I want Celine,” she said. “I’ve got to have him.”

Such a sexy voice, it was getting to me, really.

“Celine?” I said. “Give me a little background. Talk to me, lady. Keep talking…”

“Zip up,” she said.

I looked down.

“How did you know?” I asked.

“Never mind. I want Celine.”

“Celine is dead.”

“He isn’t. I want you to find him. I want him.”

“I might find his bones.”

“No, you fool, he’s alive!”

“Where?”

“Hollywood. I hear he’s been hanging around Red Koldowsky’s bookstore.”

“Then why don’t *you* find him?”

“Because first I want to know if he’s the *real* Celine. I have to be sure, quite sure.”

“But why did you come to me? There are a hundred dicks in this town.”

“John Barton recommended you.”

“Oh, Barton, yeah. Well, listen, I’ll have to have some kind of advance. And I’ll have to see you personally.”

“I’ll be there in a few minutes,” she said.

She hung up. I zipped up.

And waited.

2

She walked in.

Now, I mean, it just wasn't fair. Her dress fit so tight it almost split the seams. Too many chocolate malts. And she walked on heels so high they looked like little stilts. She walked like a drunken cripple, staggering around the room. A glorious dizziness of flesh.

"Sit down, lady," I said.

She put it down and crossed her legs high, damn near knocked my eyes out.

"It's good to see you, lady," I said.

"Stop gawking, please. It's nothing that you haven't seen before."

"You're wrong there, lady. Now may I have your name?"

"Lady Death."

"Lady Death? You from the circus? The movies?"

"No."

"Place of birth?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Year of birth?"

"Don't try to be funny…"

"Just trying to get some background…"

I got lost somehow, began staring up her legs. I was always a leg man. It was the first thing I saw when I was born. But then I was trying to get out. Ever since I have been working in the other direction and with pretty lousy luck.

She snapped her fingers.

"Hey, come out of it!"

"Huh?" I looked up.

"The Celine case. Remember?"

"Yeah, sure."

I unfolded a paperclip, pointed the end toward her.

"I'll need a check for services rendered."

"Of course," she smiled. "What are your rates?"

"6 dollars an hour."

She got out her checkbook, scribbled away, ripped the check out and tossed it to me. It landed on the desk. I picked it up. $240. I hadn't seen that much money since I hit an exacta at Hollywood Park in 1988.

"Thank you, Lady…"

"…Death," she said.

"Yes," I said. "Now fill me in a little on this so-called Celine. You said something about a bookstore?"

"Well, he's been hanging around Red's bookstore, browsing… asking about Faulkner, Carson McCullers. Charles Manson…"

"Hangs around the bookstore, huh? Hmm…"

"Yes," she said, "you know Red. He likes to run people out of his bookstore. A person can spend a thousand bucks in there, then maybe linger a minute or two and Red will say, 'Why don't you get the hell out of here?' Red's a good guy, he's just freaky. Anyway, he keeps tossing Celine out and Celine goes over to Musso's and hangs around the bar looking sad. A day or so later he'll be back and it will happen all over again."

"Celine is dead. Celine and Hemingway died a day apart. 32 years ago."

"I know about Hemingway. I got Hemingway."

"You sure it was Hemingway?"

"Oh yeah."

"Then how come you can't be sure this Celine is the real Celine?"

"I don't know. I've got some kind of block with this thing. It's never happened before. Maybe I've been in the game too long. So, I've come to you. Barton says you're good."

"And you think the real Celine is alive? You want him?"

“Real bad, buster.”

“Belane. Nick Belane.”

“All right, Belane. I want to make *sure*. It’s got to be the *real* Celine, not just some half-assed wannabe. There are too many of those.”

“Don’t we know it.”

“Well, get on it. I want France’s greatest writer. I’ve waited a long time.”

Then she got up and walked out of there. I never saw an ass like that in my life. Beyond concept. Beyond everything. Don’t bother me now. I want to think about it.

3

It was the next day.

I had cancelled my appointment to speak before the Palm Springs Chamber of Commerce.

It was raining. The ceiling leaked. The rain dripped down through the ceiling and went “spat, spat, spat, a spat a spat, spat, spat, spat, a spat, spat, spat, a spat, a spat, a spat, spat, spat, spat…”

The *sake* kept me warm. But a warm what? A warm zero. Here I was 55 years old and I didn’t have a pot to catch rain in. My father had warned me that I would end up diddling myself on some stranger’s back porch in Arkansas. And I still had time to make it. The Greyhounds ran every day. But busses constipated me and there was always some old Union Jack with a rancid beard who snored. Maybe it would be better to work on the Celine Case.

Was Celine Celine or was he somebody else? Sometimes I felt that I didn’t even know who *I* was. All right, I’m Nicky Belane. But check this. Somebody could yell out, “Hey, Harry! Harry Martel!” and I’d most likely answer, “Yeah, what is it?” I mean, I could be anybody, what does it matter? What’s in a name?

Life’s strange, isn’t it? They always chose me last on the baseball team because they knew I could drive that son-of-a-bitch out there, all the way to Denver. Jealous chipmunks, that’s what they were!

I was gifted, am gifted. Sometimes I looked at my hands and realized that I could have been a great pianist or something. But what have my hands done? Scratched my balls, written checks, tied shoes, pushed toilet levers, etc. I have wasted my hands. And my mind.

I sat in the rain.

The phone rang. I wiped it dry with a past due bill from the IRS, picked it up.

"Nick Belane," I said. Or was I Harry Martel?

"This is John Barton," came the voice.

"Yes, you've been recommending me, thank you."

"I've been watching you. You've got talent. It's a little raw but that's part of the charm."

"Great to hear. Business has been bad."

"I've been watching you. You'll make it, you just have to endure."

"Yeah. Now, what can I do for you, Mr. Barton?"

"I am trying to locate the Red Sparrow."

"The Red Sparrow? What the hell is that?"

"I'm sure it exists, I just want to find it, I want you to locate it for me."

"Any leads for me to go on?"

"No, but I'm sure the Red Sparrow is out there somewhere."

"This Sparrow doesn't have a name, does it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, a name. Like Henry. Or Abner. Or Celine?"

"No, it's just the Red Sparrow and I know that you can find it. I've got faith in you."

"This is going to cost you, Mr. Barton."

"If you find the Red Sparrow I will give you one hundred dollars a month for life."

"Hmm….Listen, how about giving me all of it in a lump sum?"

"No, Nick, you'd blow it at the track."

"All right, Mr. Barton, leave me your phone number and I'll work on it."

Barton gave me the number, then said, "I have real confidence in you, Belane."

Then he hung up.

Well, business was picking up. But the ceiling was leaking worse than ever. I shook off some rain drops, had a hit of *sake*, rolled a cigarette, lit it, inhaled, then choked out a hacking cough. I put on my brown derby, turned on the telephone message machine, walked slowly toward the door, opened it and there stood McKelvey. He had a huge chest and looked like he was wearing shoulder pads.

"Your lease is up, punk!" he spit out. "I want your dead ass out of here!"

Then I noticed his belly. It was like a soft mound of dead shit and I slammed my fist deep into it. His face doubled over into my upcoming knee. He fell, then rolled off to one side. Ghastly sight. I walked over, slipped out his wallet. Photos of children in pornographic poses.

I thought about killing him. But I just took his Gold Visa Card, kicked him in the ass and took the elevator down.

I decided to walk to Red's. When I drove I always seemed to get a parking ticket and the lots charged more than I could afford.

I walked toward Red's feeling a bit depressed. Man was born to die. What did it mean? Hanging around and waiting. Waiting for the "A train." Waiting for a pair of big breasts on some August night in a Vegas hotel room. Waiting for the mouse to sing. Waiting for the snake to grow wings. Hanging around.

Red was in.

"You're lucky," he said, "you just missed that drunk Chinaski. He was in here bragging about his new Pelouze postage scale."

"Never mind that," I said. "You got a signed copy of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*?"

"Of course."

"What's the toll?"

"2800 dollars."

"I'll think about it…"

"Pardon me," said Red.

Then he turned to a fellow thumbing through a first edition of *You Can't Go Home Again*.

"Please put that book in the case and get the hell out of here!"

It was a delicate-looking little fellow, all hunched over. Dressed in what looked like a yellow rubber suit.

He put the book back into the case and walked past us toward the street, his eyes clouding with moisture. And it had stopped raining. His yellow rubber suit was useless.

Red looked at me.

"Can you believe that some of them come in here eating icecream cones?"

"I believe worse than that."

Then I noticed somebody else was in the bookstore. He was standing near the back. I thought I recognized him from his photos. Celine. Celine?

I walked slowly down toward him. I got real close. So close that I could see what he was reading. Thomas Mann. *The Magic Mountain*.

He saw me.

"This fellow has a problem," he said, holding up the book.

"What's that?" I asked.

"He considers boredom an Art."

He put the book back in the case and just stood there looking like Celine.

I looked at him.

"This is amazing," I said.

"What is?" he asked.

"I thought that you were dead," I told him.

He looked at me.

"I thought that you were dead too," he said.

Then we just stood there looking at each other.

Then I heard Red.

"HEY, YOU!" he yelled, "GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!"

We were the only two in there.

"Which one to get the hell out?" I asked.

"THE ONE THAT LOOKS LIKE CELINE! GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!"

"But why?" I asked.

"I CAN TELL WHEN THEY'RE NOT GOING TO BUY!"

Celine or whoever it was began to walk out. I followed him.

He walked up toward the boulevard, then stopped at the newsstand.

That newsstand had been there as long as I could remember. I recalled standing there two or three decades ago with 3 prostitutes. I took them all to my place and one of them masturbated my dog. They thought it was funny. They were drunk and on pills. Then one of the prostitutes went to the bathroom where she fell and banged her head against the edge of the toilet and bled all over the place. I kept wiping the stuff up with big wet towels. I put her to bed and sat with the others and finally they left. The one in bed stayed for 4 days and nights, drinking all my beer and talking about her two children in East Kansas City.

The fellow—was it Celine?—was standing at the newsstand reading a magazine. When I got closer I noticed that it was *The New Yorker*. He put it back in the rack and looked at me.

"Only one problem there," he said.

"What's that?"

"They just don't know how to write. None of them."

Just then, a cab came idling by.

"HEY, CABBY!" Celine yelled.

The cab slowed and he leaped forward, the back door opened and he was inside.

"HEY!" I yelled at him, "I WANT TO ASK YOU SOMETHING!"

The cab was brisking toward Hollywood Boulevard. Celine leaned out, stuck out his arm, gave me the finger. Then he was gone.

First cab I had seen around those parts in decades. I mean, an empty one, just lolling by.

Well, the rain had stopped but the pain was still there. Also, there was now a chill in the air and everything smelled like wet farts.

I hunched over and moved toward Musso's.

I had the Gold Visa Card. I was alive. Maybe. I even began to feel like Nicky Belane. I hummed a little passage from Eric Coates.

Hell was what you made it.

4

I looked up Celine in the Webster. 1891-1961. It was 1993. Saying he was alive, that would make him 102 years old. No wonder Lady Death was looking for him.

And that fellow in the bookstore had looked between 40 and 50. So, that was it. He wasn't Celine. Or maybe he'd found a method to beat the aging process. Look at the movie stars, they took the skin from their ass and stuck it on the face. The skin on the ass was the last to wrinkle. They all walked around in their later years with buttock faces. Would Celine do that? Who would want to live to be 102? Nobody but a fool. Why would Celine wish to linger? The whole thing was crazy. Lady Death was crazy. I was crazy. The pilots of airliners were crazy. Never look at the pilot. Just get on board and order drinks.

I watched two flies fucking, then decided to call Lady Death. I unzipped and waited for her voice.

"Hello." I heard her voice.

"Ummm…," I said.

"What? Oh, it's you Belane. You getting anywhere on the case?"

"Celine is dead, he was born in 1891."

"I'm aware of the statistics, Belane. Listen, I know that he is alive…somewhere…and the guy in the bookstore could be him. Are you closing in on anything? I want this guy. I want him badly."

"Ummm…" I said.

"Zip up!"

"Huh?"

"You fool, I said, 'zip up!'"

"Uh…all right…"

"I want positive proof whether this guy *is* or *isn't*! I've told you that I've got this crazy mind block on this matter. Barton recommended you, he said you were one of the best."

"Oh yes, I'm also working for Barton right now, as a matter of fact. Trying to locate a Red Sparrow. What do you think about that?"

"Listen, Belane, you solve this Celine thing and I'll *tell* you where the Red Sparrow is."

"Oh will you, Lady? Oh, I'd do anything for you!"

"Like what, Belane?"

"Well, I'd kill my pet cockroach for you, I'd belt-whip my mother if she was here, I'd…"

"Stop babbling! I'm beginning to think Barton may have given me a bum steer! Well, you better get going! Either solve this Celine thing or I'm coming after *you*!"

"Hey, wait a minute, Lady!"

The phone was dead in my hand. I placed it back in its cradle. Ow. She had no block of any sort in getting right to me.

I had work to do.

I looked around for a fly to kill.

Then the door swung open and there stood McKelvey and a big stack of subnormal manure. McKelvey looked at me, then nodded toward *it*.

"This is Tommy."

Tommy looked at me with his tiny dim eyes.

"Pleased ta meatcha," he said.

McKelvey grinned a horrible grin.

"Now, Belane, Tommy is here just for one purpose and that purpose is to slowly pound you to bloody henshit. Right, Tommy?"

"Uh huh," said Tommy.

He looked like he weighed about 380. Well, shave his fur and you might get him down to 365.

I gave him a kindly smile

"Now look, Tommy, you don't know me, do you?"

"Uh-uh."

"Then why would you want to hurt me?"

"Because Mr. McKelvey told me to."

"Tommy, if Mr. McKelvey told you to drink your peepee, would you do it?"

"Hey!" said McKelvey, "stop mixing my boy up!"

"Tommy, would you eat your mother's poo-poo just because Mr. McKelvey told you to eat your mother's poo-poo?"

"Huh?"

"Shut up, Belane, I'll do the talking here!"

He turned to Tommy.

"Now, I want you to rip this guy apart like an old newspaper, just tear him to shreds and throw him to the fucking winds, got it?"

"I got it, Mr. McKelvey."

"Good, then what are you waiting for, the last rose of summer?"

Tommy stepped toward me. I slipped the luger out of the drawer, pointed it towards Tommy's gross immensity.

"Hold it, Thomas, or you'll be spouting more red than the jerseys of the Stanford football team!"

"Hey," said McKelvey, "where'd you get that damned thing?"

"A dick without a gat is like a tomcat with a rubber. Or like a clock without hands."

"Belane," said McKelvey, "you talk goofy."

"I been told. Now tell your boy to back off or I'll put so much daylight through him that you'll be able to toss a grapefruit through!"

"Tommy," said McKelvey, "come on back here and stand in front of me."

They stood there like that. I had to figure out what to do with them. It wasn't easy. I'd never won a scholarship to Oxford. I'd slept through biology and I was weak in math. But I had managed to stay alive up until now.

Maybe.

Anyhow, I momentarily held some kind of an ace in some kind of a stacked deck. I had to make a move. Now or never. September was coming. The crows were in council. The sun was bleeding.

"All right, Tommy," I said, "down on your hands and knees! Now!"

He looked at me like he didn't hear so good.

I gave him a wan smile and clicked the safety catch off the luger.

Tommy was dumb but not totally.

He dropped to his hands and knees, shaking the whole 6th floor like a 5.9 earthquake. My fake Dali fell to the floor. The one with the melted watch.

Tommy clumped there like the Grand Canyon and looked at me.

"Now, Tommy," I said, "you are going to be the elephant and McKelvey is going to be the elephant boy, got it?"

"Huh?" asked Tommy.

I looked over at McKelvey.

"Go on! Get on! Mount!"

"Belane, are you nuts?"

"Who knows? Insanity is comparative. Who sets the norm?"

"I don't know," said McKelvey.

"*Just get on*!"

"All right, all right! But I never had trouble like this before when a lease ran out."

"Get on, *asshole*!"

McKelvey climbed onto Tommy's back. He had real trouble getting his legs over the sides. Almost split his butt.

"Good," I said. "Now, Tommy, you're the elephant and you're going to carry McKelvey on your back, down the hall and into the elevator. Begin now!"

Tommy began crawling across the floor of the office.

"Belane," said McKelvey, "I'll get you for this. I swear by my mother's pubic hairs!"

“Mess with me again, McKelvey, and I’ll ram your cock down a garbage disposal!”

I opened the door and Tommy crawled out with the elephant boy.

He crawled on down the hall and as I slipped the luger back into my coat pocket I felt something in there, a crumpled up piece of paper. I took it out. It was my examination paper for the written test to renew my driver’s license. It was full of red marks. I had failed.

I tossed the paper over my shoulder and followed my friends.

We reached the elevator and I pressed the button.

I stood there humming a bit from “Carmen.”

Then out of nowhere I remembered long ago reading about how they found Jimmy Foxx dead in a skid row hotel room. All those home runs. Dead with the roaches.

The elevator came up. The door opened and I gave Tommy a boot in the ass. He crawled in bearing McKelvey. There were 3 people in there, standing, reading their newspapers.

They kept reading. The elevator went down.

I took the stairway. I was 30 pounds overweight. I needed it.

I counted 176 steps and then I was on the first floor. I stopped at the cigar stand, bought a cigar and *The Daily Racing Form*. I heard the elevator coming.

Outside, I moved through the smog resolutely. My eyes were blue and my shoes were old and nobody loved me. But I had things to do.

I was Nicky Belane, private detective.

5

Unfortunately, I ended up at the racetrack that afternoon and that night I got drunk. But the time wasn’t wasted, I was cogitating, sifting out the facts. I was right on top of everything. Any moment, I’d have everything figured out. Sure.

6

The next day I took a chance and went back to the office. After all, what's a dick without an office?

I opened the door and who was sitting there behind my desk? Not Celine. Not the Red Sparrow. It was McKelvey. He gave me a sweet, false smile.

"Good morning, Belane, how they hanging?"

"Why do you ask? You want a peek?"

"No thanks."

Then he scratched his, and yawned.

"Well, Nicky, my boy, your lease has been paid up for the next year by some mysterious benefactor."

Lady Death, said a voice inside of my head, is playing with you.

"Anybody I know?" I asked.

"Swore on my mother's honor to keep it quiet."

"Your mother's honor? She's handled more turkeyneck than the corner butcher!"

McKelvey rose up from behind the desk.

"Take it easy," I told him, "or I'll turn you into a basket case."

"I don't like you getting on my mother."

"Why not? Half the guys in this town have."

McKelvey moved around the desk toward me.

"Come closer," I said, "and I'll have your head breathing up your butt."

He stopped. I looked awesome when I was pissed.

"All right," I said, "fill me in. This benefactor…it was a woman, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Never saw a babe like that!"

His eyes looked glazed but they always looked like that.

"Come on, Mac, fill me in, tell me more…"

"I can't. I promised. Mother's honor."

"Oh Christ," I sighed. "O.k., get out of here, my lease is paid."

McKelvey shuffled slowly toward the door. Then he looked back at me over his left shoulder.

"All right," he said, "but keep the place nice and clean. No parties, no crap games, no crap. You got a year."

He walked to the door, opened it, closed it and was gone.

7

Well, I was back in my office.

Time to go to work. I picked up the phone and touch-keyed into my bookie.

“Tony’s Pizza Take Out,” he answered, “at your service.”

I gave him my code name.

“This is Mr. Slow Death.”

“Belane,” he said, “you’re into me for $475, I can’t take your action. You’ve got to clean the slate first.”

“I’ve got a 25 buck bet, that will make half-a-string. If I lose I’ll cough it all up, my mother’s honor.”

“Belane, your mother is into me for $230.”

“Yeah? And your mother’s got warts on her ass!”

“What? Listen, Belane, you been…?”

“No, no. It was another guy. He told me.”

“O.k., then.”

“All right, I want $25 to win on *Burnt Butterfly* in the 6th.”

“All right, you’re covered. And good luck. Yours seems to be running out.”

I hung up. Son-of-a-bitch, a man was born to struggle for each inch of ground. Born to struggle, born to die.

I thought about that. And thought about that.

Then I leaned back in my chair, took a good drag on my cigarette and blew an almost perfect smoke ring.

8

After lunch I decided to go back to the office. I opened the door and there was a guy sitting behind my desk. It wasn't McKelvey. I didn't know who it was. People liked to sit behind my desk. And, besides the guy sitting, there was a guy standing. They looked mean, calm but mean.

"My name's Dante," said the guy behind the desk.

"And my name's Fante," said the guy standing.

I didn't say anything. I was fumbling in the dark. A chill ran up my back and right on through the ceiling.

"Tony sent us," said the guy sitting.

"Don't know a Tony. You gentlemen have the right address?"

"Oh yeah," said the standing guy.

Then Dante said, "*Burnt Butterfly* ran out."

"Tossed the jock coming out of the gate," said Fante.

"You're kidding."

"I'm not kidding. Ask the dust."

"As a handicapper you are handicapped," said Dante.

"And Tony says you owe us half-a-string," said Fante.

"Oh that," I said, "I've got it right here…"

I moved toward my desk.

"Forget it, sucker," Dante laughed. "We've confiscated your water pistol."

I stepped back.

"Now," said Fante, "you realize that we can't let you walk around blissfully sucking air while you owe Tony half-a-string?"

"Give me 3 days…"

“You got 3 minutes,” said Dante.

“Why is it?” I asked, “that you guys take turns talking? First Dante, then Fante, on and on, don’t you ever break your rhythm?”

“We’re here to break something else,” they both spoke together. “You.”

“That was good,” I said. “I liked that. A duet.”

“Shut up,” said Dante. He pulled out a smoke and stuck it in his lips. “Hmm,” he went on, “seems like I forgot my lighter. Come here, asshole, light my cigarette.”

“‘Asshole’? You talking to yourself?”

“No, *you*, asshole, come here. Light my smoke! Now!”

I found my lighter, walked forward, stopped in front of one of the ugliest faces I had ever seen, flicked my lighter, put the flame to his fag.

“Good boy,” said Dante, “now take this cigarette out of my mouth and stick it into yours, burning-end first and keep it there until I tell you to take it out.”

“Uh-uh,” I said.

“Either that,” said Fante, “or we blow a hole in you big enough for the little people at Disneyland to dance through.”

“Wait a minute…”

“You got 15 seconds,” said Dante, taking out his stopwatch, setting it, then he said, “Now, you’re on. 14, 13, 12, 11…”

“You don’t mean it?”

“10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3…”

I heard the click of a safety catch being taken off.

I snatched the cigarette out of Dante’s mouth and stuck it into mine, burning-end first. I tried to engender a mass of saliva and to keep my tongue out of the way, but no luck, I got it, I got it good, it HURT!!!! It was vile and painful! I began to gag and had to spit the thing out.

“Bad boy!” said Dante. “I told you to keep it in until I told you to take it out! Now we are going to have to start all over again!”

“Fuck you,” I said, “kill me!”

“O.k.,” said Dante.

Just then the door opened and Lady Death walked in. She was really dolled up. I almost forgot about my mouth.

“Hey,” said Dante, “what a babe! You know her, Belane?”

“We’ve met.”

She walked over to a chair, sat down, crossed her legs, her skirt riding high. None of us could believe those legs. Even I couldn’t and I had seen them before.

“Who are these clowns?” she asked me.

“They’re emissaries from a guy called Tony.”

“Get ’em out of here, *I’m* your client.”

“All right, fellows,” I said, “it’s time to leave.”

“Oh yeah?” said Dante.

“Oh yeah?” said Fante.

Then they started laughing. Then, all at once, they stopped.

“This guy’s real funny,” said Fante.

“Yeah,” said Dante.

“I’ll get rid of them,” said Lady Death.

Then she started staring at Dante. At once, he began to lean forward in his chair. He began to look pale.

“Jesus,” he said, “I don’t feel so good…”

He turned white, then he turned yellow.

“I feel sick,” he said, “I feel awful sick…”

“Maybe it was those fishsticks you ate,” said Fante.

“Fishsticks, smishsticks, I gotta get out a here! I need a doctor or something…”

Then I saw her staring at Fante. Then Fante said, “I’m getting dizzy…What is this?…Flashes of light…Rocket flares…Where am I?”

He moved toward the door, Dante followed him. They opened the door and walked slowly toward the elevator. I walked out and watched them get in. I saw them just before the door closed. They looked horrible. Horrible.

I walked back into the room.

“Thanks,” I said, “you saved my ass…”

I looked around. She was gone. I looked under the desk. Nobody. I looked in the bathroom. Nobody. I opened the window and looked down in the street. Nobody. Well, I mean, there were plenty of people but not her. She could at least have said goodbye. Still, it had been a nice visitation.

I went back and sat behind my desk. Then I picked up the phone and touched in Tony's number.

"Yeah?" he answered, "this is…"

"Tony, this is Mr. Slow Death."

"What? You still able to talk?"

"I talk real good, Tony. I've never felt better."

"I don't understand this…"

"Your boys were by, Tony…"

"Yeah? Yeah?"

"I let them off easy this time. You send them again and I'm going to take them all the way out."

I heard Tony breathing into the phone. It was a very confused breathing. Then he hung up.

I took a pint of scotch out of the lower left hand drawer, uncapped it and had a good hit.

You messed with Belane, you were in trouble. It was as simple as that.

I capped the bottle, put it back in the drawer and wondered what I was going to do next. A good dick always has things to do. You've seen it in the movies.

9

There was a knock on the door. No, it was 5 rapid knocks, loud, insistent.

I can always take a reading on a knock. Sometimes when I get a bad reading I don't answer.

This knock was only half-bad.

"Come in," I said.

The door swung open. It was a man, mid-fifties, semiwealthy, semi-nervous, feet too big, wart on upper left forehead, brown eyes, necktie. 2 cars, 2 homes, no children. Pool and spa, he played the stockmarket and was fairly dumb.

He just stood there, sweating just a bit and staring at me.

"Sit down," I said.

"I'm Jack Bass," he said, "and…"

"I know."

"What?"

"You think your wife is copulating with somebody or somebodies."

"Yes."

"She's in her twenties."

"Yes. I want you to prove that she is doing it, then I want a divorce."

"Why bother, Bass? Just divorce her."

"I just want to prove that she…she…"

"Forget it. She'll get just as much money either way. It's the New Age."

"What do you mean?"

"It's called the no-fault divorce. It doesn't matter what anybody does."

"How come?"

"It speeds up justice, clears the courts."

"But that's not justice."

"They think it is."

Bass just sat in his chair, breathing, and looking at me.

I had to straighten out the Celine matter and find the Red Sparrow and here was this flabby ball of flesh worried because his wife was screwing somebody.

Then he spoke. "I just want to find out. I just want to find out for myself."

"I don't come cheap."

"How much?"

"6 bucks an hour."

"That doesn't seem like much money."

"Does to me. You got a photo of your wife?"

He dug into his wallet, come up with one, handed it to me.

I looked at it.

"Oh my! Does she really look like this?"

"Yes."

"I'm getting a hard-on just looking at this."

"Hey, don't be a wise guy!"

"Oh, sorry…But I'll have to keep the photo. I'll return it when I'm finished."

I put it in my wallet.

"Is she still living with you?"

"Yes."

"And you go to work?"

"Yes."

"And then, sometimes, she…"

"Yes."

"And what makes you think she…"

"Tips, phone calls, voices in my head, her changed behavior, any number of things."

I pushed a notepad toward him.

"Put down your address, home and business, phone, home and business. I'll take it from there. I'll nail her ass to the wall. I'll uncover the whole thing."

"What?"

"I am accepting this case, Mr. Bass. Upon its fruition you will be informed."

"'Fruition'?" he asked. "Listen, are you all right?"

"I'm straight. How about you?"

"Oh yeah, I'm all right."

"Then don't worry, I'm your man, I'll nail her ass!"

Bass rose slowly from his chair. He moved toward the door, then turned.

"Barton recommended you."

"There you go then! Good afternoon, Mr. Bass."

The door closed and he was gone. Good old Barton.

I took her photo out of my wallet and sat there looking at it.

You bitch, I thought, you bitch.

I got up and locked the door, then took the phone off the hook. I sat behind my desk looking at the photo.

You bitch, I thought, I'll nail your ass! Against the wall! No mercy for you! I'll catch you in the act! I'll catch you at it! You whore, you bitch, you whore!

I began breathing heavily. I unzipped. Then the earthquake hit. I dropped the photo and ducked under the desk. It was a good one. Around a 6. Felt like it lasted a couple of minutes. Then it stopped. I crawled out from under the desk, still unzipped. I found the photo again, put it back in my wallet, zipped up. Sex was a trap, a snare. It was for animals. I had too much sense for that kind of crap. I put the phone back on the hook, opened the door, stepped out, locked it and walked down to the elevator. I had work to do. I was the best dick in L.A. *and* Hollywood. I hit the button and waited for the fucking elevator to come on up.

10

Skip the rest of the day and night here, no action, it’s not worth talking about.

11

The next morning, 8 a.m., I was parked in my VW Bug across from Jack Bass's house. I had a hangover and I was reading the *L.A. Times*. Anyhow, I'd done a bit of research. Bass's wife, her first name was Cindy. Cindy Bass, formerly Cindy Maybell. Her press clippings revealed that she was a small time beauty contest winner, Miss Chili Cook-Off of 1990. Model, bit-part actress, liked to ski, student of the piano, liked baseball and water polo. Favorite color: red. Favorite fruit: banana. Liked to cat nap. Liked children. Liked jazz. Read Kant. Sure. Some day hoped to enter the bar, etc., etc. Met Jack Bass over a roulette wheel in Las Vegas. They were married two nights later.

About 8:30 a.m. Jack Bass backed out of his drive in his Mercedes and headed for his executive position at the Aztec Petroleum Corp. Now it was me and Cindy. I was going to bust her wide open. She was at my mercy. I took out the photo for a recheck. I started sweating. I pulled down the sun visor. The whore, she was dumping on Jack Bass.

I slipped the photo back into my wallet. I was beginning to feel eerie. What was wrong with me? Was this dame getting to me? She had intestines like everybody else. She had nostril hairs. She had wax in her ears. What was the big play? Why was the windshield rolling in front of me like a big wave? Must be the hangover. Vodka with beer chaser. You had to pay. Nice thing about being a drunk, though, you were never constipated. Sometimes I thought about my liver but my liver never spoke up, it never said, "Stop it, you're killing me and I'm going to kill you!" If we had talking livers we wouldn't need A.A.

I sat in the car waiting for Cindy to come out.
It was a sultry summer morning.

I must have fallen asleep, sitting there. I don’t know what awakened me. But there was *her* Mercedes backing out of the drive. She swung it around, headed south and I followed her. Red Mercedes. I followed her to the freeway, the San Diego, she took the fast lane and hit it. Well, she was doing 75 anyhow. She must have been hot. She wanted it. I felt something twitch between my legs. A sheath of sweat began to layer my forehead. She got it up to 80. She was in heat, the bitch was in heat! Cindy, Cindy! I stayed right with her 4 car lengths behind. I’d nail her ass, I’d nail her ass like it had never been nailed before! This was it! Chase and consummation! I was Nick Belane, super dick!

Then I saw the flashing red lights in my rear view mirror.

Shit!

I gradually edged over to the slow lane, saw a shoulder, parked the Bug, got out. The cops stopped 5 car lengths back. One got out on each side. I went toward them, reaching for my wallet. The tall cop flipped his gun out of the holster, pointed it at me.

“Hold it, buddy!”

I stopped. “What the hell you going to do, drill me? Go ahead, go ahead, *drill me*!”

The shorter one came around behind me, got me in an arm lock, walked me to the hood of the police car and slammed me down over it.

“You shit!” he said. “You know what we do with pricks like you?”

“Yeah, I got a damned good idea.”

“This prick is a wise guy!” said the short cop.

“Take it easy, Louie,” said the tall cop, “somebody might have a camcorder. This is not the place.”

“Bill, I hate wise guys!”

“We’ll bust him, Louis. We’ll bust his ass good later.”

I was still jammed over the hood. Cars were slowing on the freeway. The gawkers were gawking.

"Come on, fellows," I said, "we're causing a traffic jam."

"You think we give a fuck?" asked Bill "You threatened us, you ran toward us reaching into your waistband!" screamed Louie.

"I was reaching for my wallet. I wanted to show you my i.d. I'm a registered detective, city of Los Angeles. I was tailing a suspect."

Louie let go the death grip he had on my arm.

"Stand up."

"O.k."

"Now, slowly reach for your wallet and take out your driver's license."

"O.k."

I handed him a little slip of paper, folded up.

"What the hell is this?" he asked.

The cop handed it back to me.

"Unfold it, then hand it back."

I did that, said, "It's a kind of temporary license. They took my old one when I failed my driver's license test, the written one. This lets me drive until I take my next test in a week."

"You mean, you flunked your test?"

"Yeah."

"Hey, Bill, this guy flunked his driver's test!"

"What? Really?"

"I had things on my mind…"

"Looks like you had nothing on your mind," Louie smirked.

"It's for laughs," said Bill.

"And you mean you're a licensed detective?" asked Louie.

"Yep."

"Hard to believe."

"I was hot after a suspect when you flashed your lights. I was just about to nail her ass."

I handed Louie the photo.

"Holy shit!" he said. He kept staring at the photo. It was a full length shot. She was in a mini-skirt and a low cut blouse, very low cut.

"Hey, Bill, look at this!"

"I was hot on her tail, Bill, I was just about to nail her ass."

Bill kept staring at the photo.

"Uhhh uhhh uhhh," he went.

"I need the photo back, officer. Personal evidence."

"Oh yeah, sure," he said, reluctantly handing it back.

"Well, we ought to bust you," said Louie.

"But we won't," said Bill, "we'll write you up for doing 75 even though you were doing 80. But we get to keep the photo."

"What?"

"You heard."

"But that's extortion!" I said.

Bill moved his hand toward his gun.

"What did you say?"

"I said, it's a deal."

I handed the photo back to Bill. He began writing out the speeding ticket. I stood there waiting. Then he handed me the ticket.

"Sign it."

I did.

He ripped it off and handed it to me.

"You've got ten days to pay or if you plead not guilty to appear in court as indicated."

"Thank you, officer."

"And drive with care," said Louie.

"You too, buddy."

"What?"

"I said, sure."

They strolled back toward their car. I strolled toward mine. I got in, started the engine. They were just sitting back there. I pulled into traffic, then kept it at 60.

Cindy, I thought, you're really going to pay now! I'm going to nail your ass like it has never been nailed!

Then I got to the Harbor Freeway turnoff, took 110 south and just drove along, hardly knowing where I was going.

12

I rode the Harbor Freeway to the end. I was in San Pedro. I drove down Gaffey, took a left on 7th, went a few blocks, took a right on Pacific, just drove along, saw a bar, The Thirst Hog, parked, went on in. It was dark in there. The tv was off. The bartender was an old guy, looked to be 80, all white, white hair, white skin, white lips. Two other old guys sat there, chalk white. Looked like the blood had stopped running in all of them. They reminded me of flies in a spider web, sucked dry. No drinks were showing. Everybody was motionless. A white stillness.

I stood in the doorway looking at them.

Finally the bartender made a sound: "Etch…?"

"Has anybody here seen Cindy, Celine or the Red Sparrow?" I asked.

They just looked at me. One of the patrons' mouths drew together into a little wet hole. He was trying to speak. He couldn't do it. The other patron reached down and scratched his balls. Or where his balls used to be. The bartender remained motionless. He looked like a cardboard cutout. An old one. Suddenly I felt young.

I moved forward and took a bar stool.

"Any chance of getting a drink here?" I asked.

"Etch…" said the bartender.

"Vodka 7, forget the lime."

Now just kick four-and-one-half minutes in the ass and forget it. That's how long it took the bartender to get it to me.

“Thank you,” I said, “now please make me another while you are in motion.”

I took a hit of the drink. It wasn’t bad. He’d had lots of practice.

The two old guys just sat there looking at me.

“Nice day, isn’t it fellows?” I asked.

They didn’t answer. I got the feeling that they weren’t breathing. Weren’t you supposed to bury the dead?

“Listen, fellows, when was the last time either one of you pulled down a pair of women’s panties?”

One of the old guys started going, “Heh, heh, heh, heh!”

“Oh, last night, huh?”

“Heh, heh, heh, heh!”

“Was it good?”

“heh, heh, heh, heh!”

I was getting depressed. My life wasn’t going anywhere. I needed something, the flashing of lights, glamour, some damn thing. And here I was, talking to the dead.

I finished my first drink. The second was ready.

Two guys walked through the doorway wearing stocking masks.

I downed my second drink.

“ALL RIGHT! NO SHIT FROM ANYBODY! WALLETS, RINGS AND WATCHES ON THE BAR! NOW!” screamed one guy.

The other guy leaped over the bar and ran to the cash register. He pounded at it.

“HEY! HOW DO YOU OPEN THIS FUCKING THING?”

He looked around, saw the bartender. “HEY, GRAMPS! COME HERE AND OPEN THIS THING!” He pointed his gun at him. All of a sudden the bartender knew how to move. He was at the register in a wink and had it open.

The other guy was putting the stuff we had laid on the bar into a sack.

“GET THE CIGAR BOX! UNDER THE BAR!” he yelled at his buddy.

The guy behind the bar was stuffing the cash from the register into a sack. He found the cigar box. It was loaded. He stuffed it in the sack and leaped over the bar.

Then they both stood there for a moment.

"*I feel kind of crazy*!" said the guy who had leaped over the bar.

"Forget it, we're leaving!" said the other guy.

"I FEEL CRAZY!" yelled the first guy. He pointed his gun at the bartender. He fired three shots. All into the gut. The old man jerked three times, then fell.

"YOU FUCKING FOOL! WHAT DID YOU DO THAT FOR?" his cohort yelled.

"DON'T CALL ME A FOOL! I'LL KILL YOU TOO!" he screamed, then turned and pointed his gun at his partner. He was too late. The shot went through his nose and came out the back of his head. He fell over taking a bar stool down with him. The other guy ran out the door. I counted to five, then ran out after him. The two old guys were still alive when I left. I think.

I was in my car fast. I dug out from the curb, went a block, took a right and went down a back street. Then I slowed down and drove along. I heard a siren then. I lit a cigarette from the dash, turned the radio on. I got some rap music. I couldn't understand what the guy was rapping about.

I didn't know whether to go back to my place or the office.

I ended up in a supermarket pushing along a cart. I got 5 grapefruit, a roasted chicken and some potato salad. A fifth of vodka and some toilet paper.

13

I found myself back at my apartment. I dove into the chicken and the potato salad. I rolled a grapefruit across the rug. I felt frustrated. Everything was defeating me.

Then the phone rang. I spit out a half-cooked chicken wing and answered.

“Yeah?”

“Mr. Belane?”

“Yeah?”

“You’ve won a free trip to Hawaii,” somebody said.

I hung up. I walked into the kitchen and poured a vodka with mineral water plus a touch of tabasco sauce. I sat down with it, had half a hit, then there was a knock on the door. I got a bad read on the knock, but I went ahead anyhow and said, “Come on in.”

Much to my regret. It was my neighbor from 302, the mailman. His arms always hung kind of funny. His mind too. His eyes never quite looked at you but somewhere over your head. Like you were back there instead of where you were. There were a few other things wrong with him too.

“Hey, Belane, got a drink for me?”

“In the kitchen, mix your own.”

“Sure”

He walked into the kitchen, whistling Dixie.

Then he came sauntering out, a drink in each hand. He sat down across from me.

“Didn’t want to run short,” he said, nodding at his drinks.

"You know," I informed him, "they sell that stuff in a lot of places. You ought to stock up."

"Forget that…look, Belane, I'm here to talk turkey."

He drained the drink in his right hand, smashed the glass against the wall. He'd learned that from me.

"Look, Belane, I'm here to start us both on the road to easy glory."

"Sure," I said, "let's hear it."

"Loco Mike. Ran the other day. Speed like a leper's tongue on a virgin tit—ran the first quarter in 21.0. Came blazing into the stretch with a 5 length lead, 20 thousand dollar claimers, only got beat by a length and a half. Now he's dropping down against 15 thousand claimers. Rabbit like that, at 6 furlongs. All they'll see is his asshole. The *Racing Form* has him listed at 15 to 1! A steal! I'm cutting you in on the action, good buddy!"

"Why cut me in? Why don't you take *all* the action?"

He drained his other drink. Then looked around. Raised his glass.

"Hold it!" I said. "You smash that glass and you're going to have two assholes."

"Huh?"

"Think about it."

The mailman quietly set his glass down.

"Got any more to drink?"

"You know it. Pour me one too."

He walked into the kitchen. I felt myself gradually losing my patience.

Then he came out, handed a drink to me.

"Hold it," I said, "I'll take your drink."

"How come?"

"It's stronger."

He handed me the other drink, then sat down.

"Now like I said, mailbag, why cut me in?"

"Well, ha," he said.

"Yes, go on…"

"I'm a little short of green. Got nothing to put down. But after we score I can pay you from the profits."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"Look, Belane, I just need a little scratch."

"How much?"

"20 bucks."

"That's a hell of a lot of money."

"10 bucks."

"10 fucking bucks?"

"O.k., 5 bucks."

"What?"

"2 bucks."

"Drag your sack out of here!"

He drained his drink and stood up. I finished mine. He just stood there.

He said, "How come all these grapefruits are on the floor?"

"Because I like them like that."

I got up and moved toward him.

"Time to go, fellow."

"Time to go, huh? I'll go when I'm damn good and ready!"

The drinks had made him bold. That happens.

I slammed my fist into his gut. I had on my brass knuckles. Damn near went right through him.

He dropped.

I walked over and scooped up some broken glass from the floor. Then I came back, opened his mouth and dropped the glass in there. Then I rubbed his cheeks around and slapped him up a bit. His lips turned redder.

Then I went about my business of drinking. I suppose about 45 minutes passed and the mailman began to move. He rolled over, spit out a shard of glass and began crawling toward the door. He looked pitiful. He crawled right up to the door. I opened it and he crawled out and down toward his apartment. I'd have to watch him in the future.

I closed the door.

I sat down and found half a dead cigar in the ashtray. I lit it up, took a drag, gagged. Tried it again. Not too bad.

I felt introspective.

I decided not to do any more that day.

Life wore a man out, wore a man thin.

Tomorrow would be a better day.

14

The next day I was back at Red's bookstore. I was on the Celine case again. The racetrack was closed and it was a cloudy day. Red was marking up the prices on some rare items.

"How about Musso's?" he asked.

"I can't, Red. I seem to be eating all the time. Look at me."

I pulled back my coat. My gut was pushing out through my shirt. A button had popped off.

"You better get that fat sucked out. You'll have a heart attack. They suck the fat out through a tube. You can put it in a jar and look at it, it'll remind you to lay off the jelly donuts."

"I'll think about it. You want some grapefruit?"

"Grapefruit? That's not fattening."

"I know but I fell over one when I got up this morning, they're dangerous."

"Where'd you sleep, in the refrigerator?"

I sighed.

"Look, let's change the subject. You know this guy who looks like Celine?"

"Oh, him…"

"Him. He been in lately?"

"Not since you were here. You trailing this bird?"

"You might say so."

Then, just like that, he walked in. Celine.

He slid past us and went down the aisle and plucked up a book.

I walked over close to him. Real close. He had the signed copy of *As I Lay Dying*. Then he noticed me.

“In the old days,” he said, “writers’ lives were more interesting than their writing. Now-a-days neither the lives nor the writing is interesting.”

He slid Faulkner back into place.

“You live around here?” I asked.

“Maybe. How about you?”

“You once had a French accent, didn’t you?” I asked.

“Maybe. How about you?”

“Oh, nothing like that. Listen, did anybody ever tell you that you resembled somebody else?”

“We all, more or less, resemble somebody else. Look, do you have a cigarette?”

“Of course.”

I dug for my pack.

“Please,” he said, “take one and light it, smoke it. It will keep you busy.”

He began to walk away.

I lit my cigarette, took a drag. Then I followed him. I gave Red a goodbye nod, then stepped into the street. Just in time to see him get into an ‘89 Fiat at the curb. And who was parked right behind him? My Bug was parked right behind him. What luck! Talk about fornicating the odds! First time I had found curb parking in months! I leaped in, gunned out and followed him.

He went east down Hollywood Boulevard.

Lady Death, I thought, watch me, at your service.

Then I almost lost him at the next signal, but I sliced through the beginning of a red light. No problem except for a little old lady in a Caddy who called me a dirty name. I smiled.

Soon Celine and I were on the Hollywood Freeway as the sun burned through the clouds. I kept Celine in my sights. I felt good. Maybe I’d get the fat sucked out through a tube. I was still a young man. My life was before me.

Then Celine was on the Harbor Freeway.

Then he was on the Santa Monica.

Then he was on the San Diego. South.

Then Celine took a turnoff and I followed him along. The territory seemed to look familiar. I followed along about half a block back. I hoped he wasn't checking his rear view too much.

Then I saw him slow, pull over and stop. I slid over to the curb, parked and watched.

He got out of his car and walked down a few houses, then he crossed the street while looking over his shoulder. He stopped, looked around again, then went up a walkway to this house. He stepped onto the porch, looked around and knocked. It was a large house and had a familiar look.

The door opened and Celine went inside.

I pulled away from the curb and slowly drove by. It was Jack Bass's place. Say that real fast. It was only 2:30 p.m. Cindy's red Mercedes was parked in the drive.

I circled the block and parked at my old spot.

I was going to kill two birds with one stone. I was going to uncover Celine and I was going to nail Cindy's ass.

I'd give them some time. Ten minutes.

When I was in grammar school we had a lady teacher who asked us, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" And almost all the boys said they wanted to be firemen. That was dumb, you could get burned. A few guys said they wanted to be doctors or lawyers but nobody said, "I want to be a detective." And now, here I was one. Oh, when she came to me I said, "I dunno…"

The ten minutes were up. I grabbed my mini-camcorder, kicked the car door open and moved toward the house. I felt myself trembling a bit, inhaled deeply and stepped up to the door. The door lock was no problem. Within 45 seconds I was inside.

I walked down the hall, then I heard voices. I walked up to a door. They were in there. I heard their voices. Their tones were low. I pressed forward and listened.

I heard Celine.

"You need this…you know it…"

"I…" I heard Cindy, "I'm not sure…Suppose Jack finds out?"

"He'll never know…"

"Jack is a violent man…"

"He'll never know. This is for your own good…"

Cindy laughed.

"My good…? Won't you get anything out of it?"

"Of course…Here, here, look, take this in your hand…It's a beginning…"

I waited a few seconds, then I kicked the door open and swung in there with my camcorder. I had it on and focused.

They were sitting over a coffee table and Cindy appeared to be signing some papers. She looked up and screamed.

"Oh shit," I said.

I lowered the camcorder.

"What the hell is this?" Celine asked. "You know this guy?"

"I never saw him before!"

"I have," said Celine. "He hangs around this bookstore asking me stupid questions."

"I'm going to call the police!" Cindy said.

"Hold it," I said, "I can explain everything!"

"It better be good," said Cindy.

"It better," said Celine.

I couldn't think of anything. I just stood there.

"I'm going to call the police," said Cindy, "now!"

"Hold it," I said. "Your husband, Jack Bass, he hired me. I'm a dick."

"Hired you? For what?"

"To nail your ass."

"To nail my ass?"

"Yes."

"I was just trying to sell this lady some insurance," said Celine, "and you come busting in here with your camera."

"I'm sorry, it was an error. Please allow me to rectify it."

"How the hell are you going to rectify this?" asked Celine.

"I don't know right now. I'm terribly sorry. I'll find something to make all this better. Really."

"This guy is some kind of jerk," said Cindy, "a mental case!"

"I'm sorry. But I'm going to leave now. I'll contact you about everything."

"We're going to turn you over to the police!" stated Cindy.

"I must be leaving," I said.

"Oh, no!" said Cindy, "you're not going anywhere!"

She hit a buzzer as I turned to move out through the door. But there stood a reasonable facsimile of King Kong. He was monstrous. He moved slowly toward me.

"Hey, boy," I asked him, "do you like candy?"

"Punk," he said, "you're my candy!"

"How about some toys? What kinda toys you like?"

King Kong ignored that. He turned to Cindy.

"You want me to kill him?"

"No, Brewster, just fix him so he can't move around so well for a while."

"O.k."

He moved toward me.

"Brewster," I said, "who did you vote for President?"

"Huh?"

He stopped to think.

I took the mini-camcorder and hurled it straight at his playground. It slammed in on target. He bent over, grabbed his privates.

I ran forward, picked up the camcorder and brought it down on the back of his neck. I heard glass breaking.

King Kong toppled over. He fell face forward on the couch, out cold. Half his body was on the couch, the other part somewhere else.

I stepped forward and picked up what was left of the camcorder.

I looked at Cindy.

"I'm still going to nail your ass."

"This man is crazy!" she yelled.

"I believe that you are right," said Celine.

I spun on my heel and got the hell out of there.

Another wasted day.

15

The next day I was in my office. Everything seemed to be at a dead end. It had been a terrible night, I had tried to drink myself to sleep. But the walls to my apartment were thin. I had heard everything next door…

“Hey, baby, this turkeyneck is loaded with sticky white paste and it’s got to get out or I’m gonna have a stroke or something!”

“That’s your problem, buster.”

“But we’re married!”

“You’re too ugly.”

“What? Huh? You never told me.”

“I just decided.”

“Well, the cream’s rising to my ears, baby! I gotta do something!”

“You’ll do it without me, Jackhammer!”

“O.k. O.k. Where’s the cat?”

“The cat? Oh no, you bastard, *not Tinker Bell*!”

“Where’s that god damned cat? I just saw it a minute ago!”

“Don’t you dare! Don’t you dare! *Not Tinker Bell*!”

I hadn’t been able to drink myself to sleep. I had just sat there, pouring them down. No luck.

And now, like I said, it was the next morning, back at the office. I felt totally useless. I was useless. There were billions of women out there and not one of them was making her way toward my door. Why? I was a loser. I was a dick who couldn’t solve anything.

I watched the fly crawling across my desk and I got ready to take it into the darkness.

Then there was a flash of light!

I leaped up.

Celine was selling Cindy *insurance! Life insurance* on Jack Bass! Now they were going to take him out, make it look natural! They were in it together! I had them by the balls. Well, I had Celine by the balls and Cindy—well, I'd nail her ass. Jack Bass was in trouble. And Lady Death wanted Celine. And the Red Sparrow still had not been found. But I felt myself moving toward something. Something big. I took my hand out of my pocket and picked up the telephone. Then I put it down. Who the hell did I think I was going to call? I knew what time it was. And Jack Bass was in deep. I had to think. I tried to think. The fly was still crawling along the desk. I rolled up the *Racing Form*, took a swat at it and missed. It wasn't my day. My week. My month. My year. My life. God damn it.

I sat back in my chair. Born to die. Born to live like a harried chipmunk. Where were the chorus girls? Why did I feel like I was attending my own funeral?

The door swung open. And there stood Celine.

"You," I said, "it had to be you."

"I know the song," he said.

"Don't you ever knock?"

"Depends," said Celine. "Mind if I sit down?"

"Yes, but go ahead."

He reached into my cigar box, took one out, unpeeled it, bit off the end, took out a lighter, lit up, inhaled, then exhaled a gorgeous plume of smoke.

"They sell those things, you know," I told him.

"What don't they sell?"

"Air. But they will. Now, what do you want?"

"Well, good buddy…"

"Cut the crap."

"All right, all right…Well, let's see…"

Celine placed his feet up on my desk.

"Nice shoes you got there," I told him. "You buy them in France?"

"France, Schmantz, who cares?"

He exhaled another plume of smoke.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"Good question," he said. "It has thundered down through the centuries."

"'Thundered'?"

"Don't be so picky for Christ's sake. You act like a guy who had an unhappy childhood."

I yawned.

"So," he said, "it's like this. You're in deep shit on at least two counts. Breaking and entering. Assault and battery…"

"What?"

"Brewster is now a eunuch. You crushed his balls with that camcorder, they look like a couple of dried figs. Now he can sing ultra-soprano."

"And?"

"We know the whereabouts of the culprit who broke and entered, who eliminated the manhood of another."

"And?"

"And it is possible that the police might be informed."

"You got any real evidence?"

"Three witnesses."

"That's a bunch."

Celine took his feet down, leaned over the desk close to me, staring directly into my eyes.

"Belane, I need a loan of ten grand."

"I got it. *I got it! Blackmail! You swine! Blackmail!*"

I felt myself getting excited. It felt pretty good.

"It's not blackmail, sucker. I am only asking you for a loan of ten grand. A loan, got it?"

"A loan? You got any collateral?"

"Hell no."

I stood up behind my desk.

"You god-damned snail! You think I am going to hold still for this?"

I moved around the desk toward him.

"BREWSTER!" he yelled, "NOW!"

The door opened and in strolled my old friend, Brewster.

"Hi, Mr. Belane!" he said in a high pitched voice. But it didn't make him any smaller. He was the biggest son of a bitch I had ever seen. I walked around behind my desk, slid open the drawer and pulled out the.45. I leveled it at him.

"Sonny boy," I said, "this thing can stop a train! You wanna pretend you're a choo-choo? Come on, come on, choo-choo! You come along the tracks toward me! I'm gonna derail you! Come on, choo-choo! Come on!"

I flipped the safety catch off and aimed for his massive gut.

Brewster stopped.

"I don't like this game…"

"O.k.," I said, "now see that door over there?"

"Uh huh…"

"That's the bathroom door. Now I want you to go in there and sit on the potty. I don't give a damn if you pull your pants down or not. But I want you to go in there and sit on the potty until I tell you to come out!"

"O.k."

He walked over to the door, opened it, closed it and then he was in there. What a pitiful mass of dangerous nothing.

Then I pointed the.45 at Celine.

"You," I said.

"You're fucking up, Belane…"

"I always fuck up. Now, you…get in there with your boy. Go on, now…move!"

Celine put out his cigar, then slowly moved toward the crapper door. I followed along behind him. I goosed him with the.45.

"Get on in there!"

He walked in and closed the door. I took out my key and locked it. Then I went to my desk and slowly began pushing it toward the crapper door. It was a very heavy desk. I had to go inch by inch. It was hell. It took me ten minutes to move it 15 feet. Then it was shoved directly against the door.

"Belane," I heard Celine say through the door, "you let us out now and we'll call it even. I won't need the loan. I won't go to the heat. Brewster won't hurt you. And I'll take care of Cindy."

"Hey, baby," I said, "*I'll* take care of Cindy! I'm going to nail her ass!"

I left them there. I locked the office door, walked down the hall and took the elevator down. Suddenly I felt better about everything. The elevator hit the first floor and I walked out into the street. First bum who hit on me, I gave him a dollar. I told the second bum I had just given another bum a dollar. Third bum, same thing, etc. There wasn't even any smog that day. I moved forward with a purpose. I had decided on lunch: shrimp and fries. My feet looked good moving along the pavement.

16

After I ate I parked a quarter of a block from Cindy's. There was her red Mercedes parked in the drive. She was probably waiting for Celine and Brewster to return. Too bad. I turned on the radio for some news.

"You fool," a voice came from the radio, "you aren't making any progress!"

"Who, me?" I asked.

"You're the only one sitting here, aren't you?"

I looked around. "Yes," I said, "I'm the only one."

"Then get your ass hopping!"

It was the voice of Lady Death coming through the radio.

"Listen, baby, I'm working on the case now. I'm on a stake-out."

"Who are you staking out?"

"A connection of Celine's. It all ties together."

"So do your shoes. Where's Celine?"

"In a crapper with a 400 pound eunuch."

"What's he doing there?"

"I'm letting him cool off."

"I don't want him hurt. He's mine."

"I won't hurt him, baby, honest injun!"

"Sometimes, Belane, I think you're some kind of subnormal."

"OVER AND OUT!" I screamed and snapped the radio off.

Then I just sat there looking at the red Mercedes and thinking of Cindy. I had my backup mini-camcorder with me. I began to feel hot for the action. The thought occurred to me that I might slip into the premises and pick up on something. Maybe I could catch one of her conversations on the telephone. Maybe I would stumble onto some clue. Sure, it was dangerous. Broad daylight. But I thrived on danger. It made my ears tingle and my butthole pucker. You only live once, right? Well, except for Lazarus. Poor sucker, he had to die twice. But I was Nick Belane. You only rode the merry-go-round once. Life was for the daring.

I slipped out of my car with my mini-camcorder. And I also carried my briefcase as a ploy. I tipped my derby low over my left eye and moved toward the house. My inner sensor was on fully. Something was going on in that house. I felt it strongly. I even bit my tongue in the excitement. I spit out some blood and moved toward the door. Again, it was no problem. 47 seconds and I was inside.

I moved down the hall with my ears pricked. I began to think I was hearing voices. I was. A man's and a woman's. I paused at the bottom of the stairway. Yes, the voices came from upstairs. I moved slowly up the stairway. I heard the voices much better. One I recognized as Cindy's. I kept moving forward, then stopped outside the door. It was evidently a bedroom door. I pressed closer.

I heard Cindy laughing. "What do you think you're going to do with that thing?"

"One guess, baby! I've been waiting a long time!"

"Well, you came to the right place, big boy!"

"I'm going to ride you all the way to hell and back, baby!"

"Oh yeah?"

"You bitch!"

I heard Cindy laughing again. Then it got quiet. It stayed quiet for a little while. Then it began to get noisy. I heard hard breathing and a slight thumping sound, plus the working of bed springs.

"Oh!" I heard Cindy. "Oh, my god!"

I put the briefcase down, turned on the camcorder, kicked the door open.

"I'VE NAILED YOUR ASS!"

"WHAT?" the guy looked around from his position. Cindy's legs came down and she SCREAMED.

The guy leaped to the floor and faced me. Horrible looking fat son-of-a-bitch.

"WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS?" he yelled.

It was Jack Bass. For Christ's sake, it was Jack Bass!

I spun around and ran down the stairway.

"HOLY SHIT!" I yelled.

I was moving toward the door. As I yanked it open, out of the side of my eye, I saw Jack Bass standing there, balls naked. He had an object in his hand. A gun. He fired. The bullet spun the derby around on my head. He fired again. I felt death rush by my right ear. Then I was sprinting down the sidewalk. I dashed into the street toward my car. Too late, I saw something in the way: an old man on a bicycle pedalling along and eating an apple. I smashed right through him leaving him twisted within the spinning wheels of his bike, upon the asphalt.

I was into the Bug in a flash. I went screeching from the curb. The old man was slowly getting up. I swerved to miss him, jumped the curbing and was onto the sidewalk. Then I was blazing past Jack Bass's place. He was standing in the doorway, still balls naked and he got off 3 more shots. One went right through the monkey hanging from my rear view mirror. The second passed between me and nowhere. The third came through the back of the front seat, passenger's side, hit the glove compartment, and made a hole.

Then I was out of there. I zigzagged up and down a half a dozen side streets. Then I found a boulevard and drove along with the traffic. It was a typical Los Angeles day: smog, a half-sun and no rain for months.

I pulled into a McDonald's, ordered a large fries, coffee and an order of chicken-on-a-bun.

17

I went back to the office. Brewster and Celine had broken out of the crapper. The crapper door was smashed open. I pushed my desk back. It took me 15 minutes.

I sat down and tried to piece everything together.

Now everybody was after my ass: Celine, Brewster, Cindy, Jack Bass and Lady Death. Maybe even Barton. I was no longer sure who my clients were or if I even had any.

I could be arrested for any number of recent offenses. Or somebody could come to get me. The office was a dangerous place to be. I checked my holster for the.45. Still there. Nice baby. Well, they weren't going to run me out of my office. A dick without an office wasn't a dick.

And I didn't know if Celine *was* Celine and I hadn't found the Red Sparrow. Nothing was moving.

It had been a long day. I put my feet up on the desk and leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes. Soon I was asleep.

In my dream I was sitting in this cheap bar. I was having a double whiskey and soda. I was the only one in the bar except the barkeep who seemed rather indistinct. He just stood at the other end of the bar reading *The National Enquirer*. Then a really crappy and dissolute sort walked in. He needed a shave, he needed a haircut, he needed a bath. He was dressed in a dirty yellow raincoat which came down to his shoetops. Under the raincoat you could see a white t-shirt and a faded orange tie. He moved toward me like a stinking wind. He took the stool next to mine. I had a hit of my drink. The bartender looked over. He caught my eye.

"I'm hungry," the barkeep said. "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse."

"I wish you'd eat some of those I've bet on," I told him.

No wonder he looked indistinct. There wasn't much to him. He was as thin as a rail. His cheeks sagged, paper thin. I looked away.

The other guy was still on the stool next to me.

"Psst…" he went.

I ignored him. I looked back at the bartender.

"Listen," I said to him, "I'll finish my drink and you can lock up, go some place and get something to eat."

"Thanks," he said, "I got to keep this place open. I'll be all right. I'll think of something."

"Psst…" the guy next to me went again.

"Get off my ear, buddy," I told him.

"I got some info…"

"Don't need it. I read the papers."

"It's info that ain't in the papers."

"Like what?"

"The Red Sparrow."

"Hey, barkeep!" I yelled, "a drink for this gentleman! Give him a rum and coke!"

The barkeep worked at it.

"You live in Redondo Beach?" the guy asked me.

"East Hollywood."

"Know a guy, looks just like you, he lives in Redondo Beach."

"That so?"

"Yep."

The guy's drink arrived. He drained it right off.

"I had a brother," he said, "lived in Glendale. Killed himself."

"He look like you?" I asked.

"Uh huh."

"Then it figures."

"I got a sister, lives in Burbank."

"Cut the crap."

"It ain't crap."

"I want to hear about the Red Sparrow."

"Sure. I'll put you right on it."

"Well?"

"I'm thirsty…"

"Barkeep!" I yelled. "Another rum and coke for this gentleman!"

The guy waited for his drink. It arrived. He slammed it down. Then he turned and looked at me with his beady, bleary, vacant eyes.

"I got the Sparrow right on me," he said.

"What?"

"I mean, I got it in my pocket."

"Great! Let's see it!"

He fumbled around in a pocket. He kept fumbling.

"Hmmm…can't seem to find it…"

"You prick! You took me! I'm going to bust your sack!"

"I know I had it somewhere…"

"I'm going to uncoil your springs, jerko!"

"Wait…wait…something here…yes. In my other pocket…I was looking in the wrong pocket…"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, look…here…here it is…the Red Sparrow!"

He pulled it out of his pocket and placed it on the bar. I looked. It was a dead pigeon.

"That's a dead pigeon!" I said.

"No," he said, "that's the Red Sparrow."

I put some bills on the bar for the drinks, then I stood up and gathered the guy up by the collar of his filthy raincoat. I hustled him toward the door, opened it and threw him out into the street. Then I turned back to close the door. And I saw the bartender. He had the pigeon in his hands and was eating it, gnawing at it. His mouth was full of feathers and blood. He winked at me.

Then my desk phone rang and I awakened.

18

I picked up the phone.

"Belane Detective Agency…."

"My name is Grovers, Hal Grovers, I need your help. The police laugh at me."

"What is it, Mr. Grovers?"

"A space alien is after me."

"Ha, ha, ha, Mr. Grovers, come on now…"

"You see, everybody laughs at me!"

"Sorry Grovers. But before you talk to me any more I gotta tell you my fee."

"What is it?"

"6 dollars an hour."

"That doesn't seem to be a problem."

"No rubber checks or you'll be carrying your walnuts in a sack, got it?"

"Money is not my problem," he said, "it's this woman."

"What woman, Grovers?"

"Hell, the one we're talking about, this space alien."

"The space alien is a woman?"

"Yeah, yeah…"

"How do you know this?"

"She told me."

"You believe her?"

"Sure, I've seen her do things."

"Like what?"

"Well, float up through the ceiling, things like that…"

"You a drinking man, Grovers?"

"Sure. How about you?"

"Wouldn't do without it…Now, listen, Grovers, before we go any further you'll have to get down here in person. It's the third floor of the Ajax Building. Knock before you enter."

"Any special knock?"

"Yeah, Shave-and-a-Haircut, Six-Bits, then I'll know it's you…"

"All right, Mr. Belane…"

I killed four flies while waiting. Damn, death was everywhere. Man, bird, beast, reptile, rodent, insect, fish didn't have a chance. The fix was in. I didn't know what to do about it. I got depressed. You know, I see a box boy at the supermarket, he's packing my groceries, then I see him sticking himself into his own grave along with the toilet paper, the beer and the chicken breasts.

Then the secret knock came at the door and I said, "Please enter, Mr. Grovers."

He walked in. Not much to him. Four feet eight, 158 pounds, 38 years old, greengray eyes with a tic in the left eye, small ugly yellow mustache, same color as hair which was thinning on top of his too round head. He walked with his toes out, sat down.

We sat looking at each other. That's all we did. Five minutes went by. Finally I got pissed.

"Grovers, why don't you say something?"

"I was waiting for you to speak first."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

I leaned back in my chair, lit a cigar, put my feet on the table, inhaled, exhaled, and blew out a perfect smoke ring.

"Grovers, this woman, this…space alien…tell me a bit about her…"

"She calls herself Jeannie Nitro…"

"Tell me more, Mr. Grovers."

"You won't laugh at me like the police did?"

"Nobody laughs like the police, Mr. Grovers."

“Well…she’s a hot number from outer space.”

“Why do you want to get rid of a hot number?”

“I’m afraid of her, she controls my mind.”

“Like how?”

“Like anything she says, I have to do.”

“Suppose she told you to eat your poo-poo, would you do that?”

“I think I would…”

“Grovers, you’re just pussy-whipped. Lot of men like that.”

“No, it’s the tricks she does, they’re frightening.”

“I’ve seen all the tricks, Grovers, and then some…”

“You haven’t seen her appear out of nowhere, you haven’t seen her vanish through the ceiling.”

“You’re boring me, Grovers, this is a bunch of crap.”

“No, it ain’t, Mr. Belane.”

“‘Ain’t’? Where the hell you come from Grovers? You talk like a backwoodsman.”

“And you don’t look like a detective, Mr. Belane.”

“Huh? What? Then what do I look like?”

“Well, let’s see, let me think…”

“Don’t take too fucking long. This is costing you 6 dollars an hour.”

“Well, you look like…a plumber.”

“A plumber? A plumber. O.k. What would you do without a plumber? Can you think of anybody more important than a plumber?”

“The president.”

“The president? There you go, wrong! Wrong again! Everytime you open your mouth you say something wrong!”

“I’m not wrong.”

“There you see! You did it again!”

I put out my cigar and lit a cigarette. This guy was a pure piece of crap. But he was a client. I looked at him a long time. It was hard work looking at him. I stopped looking. I looked over his left ear.

"O.k. what do you want me to do? With this space alien? This Jeannie Nitro?"

"Get rid of her."

"I'm no hit man, Grovers."

"Just get her out of my life one way or the other."

"You had sex yet?"

"You mean today?"

"I mean, with *her*."

"No."

"You got a place of residence on this bimbo? Phone number? Occupation? Tattoo? Hobby? Peculiar habits?"

"Only the last…"

"Like what?"

"Like she floats through the ceiling and all that."

"Grovers, you're crazy. You don't need me, you need a shrink."

"I've been to the shrinks."

"And what do they say?"

"Nothing. Only they charge more than 6 dollars an hour."

"What do they charge?"

"One-hundred-seventy-five dollars an hour."

"That proves you're crazy."

"Why?"

"Anybody pays that has got to be crazy."

Then we just sat there looking at each other. It seemed pretty dumb. I was trying to think. My temples hurt.

Then the door swung open. And in walked this woman. Now all that I can tell you is that there are billions of women on earth, right? Some look all right. Most look pretty good. But every now and then nature pulls a wild trick, she puts together a special woman, an unbelievable woman. I mean, you look and you can't believe. Everything is perfect undulating motion, quicksilver, snake-like, you see an ankle, you see an elbow, you see a breast, you see a knee, it all melds into a giant, taunting totality, with such beautiful eyes smiling, the mouth turned down a bit, the lips held there as if they were about to burst into laughter over your helplessness. And they know how to dress and their long hair burns the air. Too goddamned much.

Grovers stood up.

"Jeannie!"

She glided into the room like a strip teaser on roller skates. She paused before us as the walls trembled. She looked at Grovers.

"Hal, what are you doing with this 2nd rate dick?"

"Hey, hold it, bitch!" I said.

"Well, Jeannie, I got a little problem and I thought I might seek some help."

"Help? From who?"

"Can't say. Cat's got my tongue."

"Hal, you've got no problem as long as you have me. I can do anything better than this 2nd rate dick."

I stood up. I was standing up anyhow.

"Yeah, wench? Let's see you get a 7 inch hard-on."

"Sexist pig!"

"See, I gotcha, *gotcha*!"

Jeannie wallowed about the room a bit, driving us all mad. Then she swung around. Looked at Grovers.

"Come here, dog! Crawl across the floor toward me! Now!"

"*Don't do it, Hal*!" I screamed.

"Huh?"

He was crawling across the floor toward Jeannie. He got closer and closer. He crawled up to her feet, then stopped.

"Now," she said, "lick the toes of my shoes with your tongue!"

Grovers did it. He licked away. He kept going. Jeannie looked at me and smirked. A real smirking smirk. I couldn't handle it.

I leaped up.

"YOU FUCKING WHORE!" I screamed.

I unbuckled my belt, slipped it from my pants, walked around the desk with the belt doubled up.

"You fucking whore," I said, "I AM GOING TO NAIL YOUR ASS!"

I rushed toward her. What was left of my soul quivered in a joyous excitement. Her miraculous buns blazed in my mind. Heaven turned upside-down and quivered.

"Drop that belt, jerkoff," she said, snapping her fingers.

The belt dropped out of my hand. I stood frozen.

She turned to Grovers.

"Come on, silly boy, get up off your knees. We are leaving this stupid place."

"Yes, darling."

Grovers got up and followed her to the door, it opened, closed and they were gone. I still couldn't move. The bitch must have used a ray gun on me. And I was still frozen. Maybe I had chosen the wrong profession? After about twenty minutes I began to feel a tingling all through my body. Then I found that I could move my eyebrows. Next my mouth.

"God damn it," I said.

Then the other parts began to gradually loosen up. Finally I took one step. Two steps. Then more steps, toward my desk. I got around behind it. Opened a drawer. Found the pint of vodka. Unscrewed it. Had a good straight hit. Decided to call it a day and begin all over again tomorrow.

19

Back at the office, the next day, I was confused. I didn't know who my clients were or what the hell. I decided to do something about it. I had the business number of Jack Bass. I rang him.

"Hello," he said.

"Bass, this is Belane."

"You son-of-a-bitch."

"Take it easy, Bass, I got a black belt."

"You'll need it next time you bust in on one of my love sessions."

"Jack, all I saw was a bobbing ass. I didn't know it was you until you turned your head."

"Who else do you think it was? You think some guy is going to slam her in my own home?"

"It's been done plenty of times."

"What?"

"I don't mean your place, Jack."

"Where then?"

"It doesn't matter."

"What doesn't matter?"

"I mean, it doesn't relate to your case. Let's talk turkey."

"What?"

"You want me on this case or not?"

"You're not getting anywhere, just videoing my butt."

"I'm right on your case, Jack."

"Like what?"

"I got a tie-in."

"What?"

"I got a link."

"'Tie-in?' 'Link?' What are you talking about?"

"I can tie her in with this guy. I know him. A shady sort. They are up to no good."

"You caught them together?"

"Not yet."

"Why not?"

"I'm moving slow. I'm going to let them trap themselves."

"Can't you nail them now?"

"I got to wait until he rings the gong."

"What?"

"Got to catch them in the act."

"I don't know if you know what you're doing, Belane."

"I know exactly what I'm doing. I'll nail him as soon as he rings the gong."

"I wish you wouldn't talk that way."

"The world is no kindergarten, Jack. I'm trying to get down on this case."

"Get down?"

"I want to nail her ass. You want me to nail her ass, don't you?"

"Just get me some proof."

"The proof is in the pudding, Bass."

"You getting close to something, Belane?"

"I can smell it, I can sniff it, I'm hot on the trail. I know this guy. He's a Frenchman. And you know about Frenchmen, don't you?"

"No, what about Frenchmen?"

"If you don't know, Bass, I can't tell you. I don't have all day. Now, do you want me to follow up on this goddamned case or not?"

"You say you're closing in?"

"I'm right on top of both of them."

"What?"

"You want me or not, Bass? I'm gonna count to five. One, two, three, four…"

"All right, all right, follow it up."

"Fine, Jack. Now, a little matter…."

"What?"

"I'll need a month in advance."

"A month? I thought you were hot on it."

"I gotta lay the trap. I gotta set it up. I gotta make sure. When he hits that gong…"

"All right, all right, the check is on the way!"

He slammed the phone down on me. Acted like a guy in love. What a sucker….

Next I phoned Grovers. He had given me his business number. The phone rang 3 times, he picked it up.

"Hello," he said, "This is the Silver Haven Mortuary."

"Jesus," I said.

"What?" he asked.

"Grovers, you play with stiffs."

"What?" he asked.

"Stiffs. Stiffs. This is Nick Belane."

"What do you want, Mr. Belane?"

"I'm working on your space alien case, Mr. Grovers."

"Yes, I remember."

"Tell me, Hal, why do you do what you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Playing with the dead. Why? Why?"

"It's my occupation. A man has to make a living."

"But playing with stiffs? That's kind of weird. That's sick. Do you drain the blood? What do you do with the blood after you drain it?"

"I have an employee who does that, Billy French."

"Put him on, I want to talk to him."

"He's out to lunch."

"You mean, he eats?"

"Yes."

I paused. I inhaled, I exhaled. Then I spoke. "Look, Grovers, you want me to follow up this case?"

"You mean, Jeannie Nitro?"

"Of course. You got any other space babes working?"

"No."

"Well, you want me to get her off your neck?"

"Of course. But do you think you can? Looks to me like you struck out the only time you met her."

"Grovers, even Ted Williams struck out now and then. I'll finally slam that whore so far you'll never see her again!"

"I don't think she's a whore, Mr. Belane."

"Just a manner of speaking. No offense meant against the bimbo."

"Do you think you can do anything about her?

"Even as we are speaking, Grovers, I am working on a link, a tie-in."

"Like what?"

"I can't tell you too much. But the fact that you play with stiffs and that she is a space alien, that's a tie-in, a link."

"What do you mean, Mr. Belane?"

"I can't tell you too much. But I have been consulting with a specialist in these matters. He's got a book on the space aliens but he requested more background on you."

"All right, what do you want to know?"

"Hold it. Before I put any more time on this case, I'll need another check. Two weeks in advance."

"Do you think you can do something?"

"God damn it, I've just told you, I'm in full swing on this matter!"

"All right, Mr. Belane, I'll get a check in the mail today. Two weeks."

"You're a wise man, Mr. Grovers."

"Yes."

"Oh, Mr. Belane, Billy French just came back from lunch. You want to talk to him?"

"No, but ask him what he had for lunch."

"Just a moment…"

I waited. Then he was back. “He said roast beef and mashed potatoes.”

“That’s sickening!”

“What?”

“I’ve got to go now, Mr. Grovers.”

“But I thought you wanted more background on me.”

“I’ll send you a questionnaire.”

I hung up, swung my feet up on the desk. I was putting the pieces back in line. I was there. Nick Belane, dick. Yet I still had to solve the Red Sparrow affair. And then there was Celine and Lady Death. There was always Lady Death.

Now there was a whore.

I mean, what else could you call her?

20

I had to think about it. I had to think about all of it. Somehow, it was all tying together: space, death, Sparrow, stiffs, Celine, Cindy, Bass. But I couldn't quite fit the pieces together. Not yet. My temples began to throb. I had to get out of there.

The office walls held no answers. I was going goofy, I began to think of myself in bed with Lady Death, Cindy and Jeannie Nitro, all of them, at once. All too much. I put on my derby and walked out the door.

I found myself at the racetrack. Hollywood Park. There were no live horses. They were at Oak Tree. The races were telecast and you bet as usual.

I took the escalator up. Guy behind me bumped against one of my hip pockets.

"Oh, sorry," he said. "Pardon me."

I always carried my wallet in my left front pocket. You learned, you learned. After a while.

Passed the Turf Club. Looked in. Just a bunch of old guys. With money. How did they do it? And how much did you need? And what did it all mean? We all died broke and most of us lived that way. It was a debilitating game. Just to get your shoes on in the morning was a victory.

I pushed open the door and stepped into the clubhouse area. And there was the mailman standing there sucking on a coffee. I walked up to him.

"Who the hell let you in here?" I asked him.

His face looked out of shape. Swollen.

"Belane," he said, "I'm going to kill you."

"You shouldn't drink coffee," I said, "it will keep you awake nights."

"I'm going to take you out, Belane, your days are numbered."

"Who do you like in the first?" I asked him.

"*Dog Ears*."

"Here," I handed him a couple of bucks, "get lucky."

"Hey, thanks Belane!"

"Forget it," I said, then walked off.

Something was always after a man. It never relented. No rest, ever.

I walked over to concessions and got a large coffee.

"Who do you like in the first, Belane?" the waitress asked.

"Can't tell you or you'll beat the odds down to nothing."

"Thanks, jerk," she said.

I slid her tip back across the counter and put it back in my pocket. I found a seat near the screen and sat down and opened the *Form*. Then I heard a voice behind me.

"That two bucks ain't gettin' you off, Belane. You're finished."

It was the mailman. I stood up and turned around.

"Give me the two fucking bucks back then!"

"No way, man!"

"I'll bust your damned sack!" I told him.

He smiled and moved toward me. I felt the edge of the blade pressed against my gut. It was just the tip, he had the rest covered with his fingers.

"I got 6 inches here and I'd just love to sink it into your stupid, fat gut!"

"How come you're not working today? Who the hell's delivering the mail?"

"Shut up! I'm trying to decide whether to kill you or not."

"Buddy, I got 10 bucks here for you to bet on *Dog Ears*."

"How much?"

"$20."

"How much?"

I felt the tip of the knife prick my skin.

"$50."

"All right, reach into your wallet, slip out a $50 and stick it in my front shirt pocket."

I felt the sweat rolling down behind my ears. I worked the wallet out of my left front pocket, slipped out a $50 and slipped it into his front pocket. I felt the tip of the knife withdraw.

"Now, sit down there and open up your *Form* and begin reading it."

I did that. Then I felt the tip of the knife against the back of my neck.

"Feel lucky," he said.

Then he walked off.

I sat there and finished my coffee. Then I got up and walked out. I took the escalator down, got to parking, got into my car and drove out of there. Some days just weren't your days. I drove all the way to Hollywood, parked it somewhere and walked into a movie. I got some popcorn and a soft drink and sat down. The movie was on but I didn't watch it. I just chewed at the popcorn and sucked at the drink. And wondered if *Dog Ears* had taken the first.

21

I couldn't sleep that night. I drank beer, I drank wine, I drank vodka, all to no avail.

I hadn't solved anything. All my cases were dormant. My father had told me that I would be a failure. He was a failure also. Bad seed.

I flipped on the tv. I had one in the bedroom. A young woman came on and told me that she would talk to me, make me feel good. All I needed was a credit card. I decided against it. Then the woman's face vanished from the screen and it was Jeannie Nitro's face.

"Belane," she said, "I don't want you messing in my affairs."

"What?" I said.

She repeated the sentence and I switched the tv off. I poured another vodka, straight. I switched out the lights and sat in bed in the dark. I took a hit of the vodka.

Then there was a large buzzing sound like a cloud of bees circling a disturbed hive. Then there was a flash of purple light and Jeannie Nitro stood there. It scared the hell out of me.

"Scare you, Belane?" she asked.

"Hell no," I answered, "don't you have any manners? Don't you knock before you enter?"

Jeannie Nitro looked about the room.

"You need a maid," she told me, "this place is filthy."

I drained my vodka, tossed the glass to one side.

"Never mind that, I'm going to nail your ass."

"As a detective, you lack three things."

"Like?"

“Drive, direction and detection.”

“Yeah? Well, I’m on to your game, baby.”

“Is that so?”

“You’re sucking up to Grovers because he’s a mortician and because you want to use his dead bodies to house your alien friends in.”

She sat down in a chair, found one of my cigarettes, lit it and laughed.

“Do I look like I’m in a dead body?”

“Not exactly.”

“We can create our own bodies. Watch!”

Again there was the buzzing sound, a flash of purple light and over in the corner of the room appeared another Jeannie Nitro. She was standing by my potted plant.

“Hello, Belane,” she said.

“Hello, Belane,” said the Jeannie Nitro sitting in the chair.

“Hey,” I said, “can you be in two bodies at the same time?”

“No,” said the Jeannie Nitro sitting in the chair. “But,” said the Jeannie Nitro standing by the potted plant, “we can leap from one body to another.”

I climbed out of bed to pick up my glass and pour another vodka.

“You sleep in your shorts,” said one Jeannie Nitro.

“Disgusting,” said the other.

I got back into bed with my drink and propped myself up against a pillow.

There was another sound of buzzing, a flash of purple light and the Jeannie by the potted plant was gone. I looked at the one in the chair.

“Look,” I said, “Grovers hired me to get you off his ass and that’s just what I intend to do.”

“You talk big for a man whose talents hover near the zero mark.”

“Yeah? Well, I’ve cracked tougher cases than yours!”

“Really? Tell me about one of them.”

“All my back files are confidential.”

"Confidential or non-existent?"

"Don't get me pissed, Jeannie or I'll…"

"You'll what?"

"I'll…" I lifted the vodka toward my mouth. Suddenly my hand froze two inches from my lips. I couldn't move.

"You're 3rd rate, Belane. Don't play with me. And I'm being kind now. Feel lucky."

Feel lucky? That was the second time I had heard that within 12 hours.

There was the buzz, the flash of purple and Jeannie Nitro was gone.

I sat there in bed, unable to move, the glass still two inches from my lips. I sat and waited. I had time to muse over my career. There wasn't much to muse about. Maybe I was in the wrong profession. But it was too late to start anything else.

I just sat there and waited. In about ten minutes there was a tingling all over my body. I was able to move my hand just a little. Then a little more. I put the vodka to my lips, managed to tilt my head and I drained the glass. I tossed it to the floor, stretched out in bed and waited once more for sleep. I heard the sound of gunfire outside and realized that everything was all right with the world. In five minutes I was asleep along with everybody else.

22

I awakened depressed. I looked up at the ceiling, at the cracks in the ceiling. I saw a buffalo running over something. I think it was me. Then I saw a snake with a rabbit in his mouth. The sun came through the rips in the shade and formed a swastika on my belly. My bunghole itched. Were my hemorrhoids coming back? My neck was stiff and my mouth tasted like sour milk.

I got up and walked to the bathroom. I hated to look in that mirror but I did. And I saw depression and defeat. Sagging dark pouches under the eyes. Little cowardly eyes, the eyes of a rodent trapped by the frigging cat. My flesh looked like it wasn't trying. It looked like it hated being part of me. My eyebrows hung down, twisted, they looked as if they were demented, demented eyebrow hairs. Horrible. I looked disgusting. And I wasn't even ready for a bowel movement. I was all plugged up. I walked over to the toilet to piss. I aimed properly but somehow it came out sideways and splashed on the floor. I tried to re-aim and pissed all over the toilet seat which I had forgotten to lift. I ripped off some toilet paper and mopped up. Cleaned the seat. Tossed the paper into the can and flushed. I walked to the window and looked out and saw a cat shit on the roof next door. Then I turned back, found my toothbrush, squeezed the tube. Too much came out. It flopped wearily against my brush and fell into the sink. It was green. It was like a green worm. I stuck my finger into it, stuck some of it on the brush and began brushing. Teeth. What goddamned things they were. We had to eat. And eat and eat again. We were all disgusting, doomed to our dirty little tasks. Eating and farting and scratching and smiling and celebrating holidays.

I finished brushing my teeth and went back to bed. I had no kick left, no zing. I was a thumbtack, I was a piece of linoleum.

I decided to stay in bed until noon. Maybe by then half the world would be dead and it would only be half as hard to take. Maybe if I got up at noon I'd look better, feel better. I knew a guy once who didn't excrete for days. He finally just exploded. Really. Shit flew out of his belly.

Then the phone rang. I let it ring. I never answered the phone in the morning. It rang 5 times and stopped. There. I was alone with myself. And disgusting as I was it was better than being with somebody else, anybody else, all of them out there doing their pitiful little tricks and handsprings. I pulled the covers up to my neck and waited.

23

I got to the track for the 4th race. I had to break through somewhere. All my leads were stalled. I pulled out the list. I had it all written down:

1. Find out if Celine *is* Celine. Inform Lady Death of findings.
2. Locate the Red Sparrow.
3. Find out if Cindy is screwing around on Bass. If so, nail her ass.
4. Get the Space Alien off of Grovers' back.

I folded the list and put it back in my pocket. I opened the *Form*. They were coming out on the track for the 4th. It was a warm easy day. Everything seemed in a dream state. Then I heard a sound behind me. There was somebody sitting behind me. I turned. It was Celine. He smiled at me.

"Nice day," he said.

"What the hell you doing here?" I asked him.

"Paid my way in. They didn't ask any questions," said Celine.

"You tailing me, motherfucker?" I asked.

"I was going to ask you the same thing," he said.

"There are a lot of things I don't understand," I told him.

"Me neither," he said. Then he climbed over the seat and sat down next to me. "We're going to talk," he said.

"Sure," I said, "now, first off, what's your name? Your real name?"

I felt the snub-nosed revolver poking me in the side. He was holding it under his coat.

"You got a permit for that thing?" I asked.

"I'll ask the questions here," he said, giving me a little poke with the firearm.

"Go ahead," I said.

"Who put the tail on me?"

"Lady Death."

"Lady Death?" he laughed. "Don't give me that crap!"

"I crap you not. That's what she calls herself, 'Lady Death.'"

"Some nut, huh?"

"Maybe."

"Where can I find this bitch?"

"I don't know. She only contacts me."

"You expect me to buy that?"

"I don't know, it's all I got to sell."

"What's she want?"

"She wants to know if you're the real Celine."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Who do you like in this race?" he asked.

"*Green Moon*," I told him.

"*Green Moon*? That's my selection."

"O.k.," I said, "let me go bet. I'll be right back."

I started to rise.

"Sit down," he intoned, "before I blow your balls off."

I sat down.

"Now," he said, "I want this woman off my tail. Also, I want her real name. I'm not buying this Lady Death thing. And I want you to get busy on this matter. In fact, beginning now!"

"But *she's* my client. How can you be my client?"

"You figure it out, fat boy."

"Fat boy?"

"You got stuff hanging from your gut."

"Hanging or not hanging, if I work for you I get paid, and I don't come cheap."

"Name it."

"6 bucks an hour."

He reached into his pocket and came out with a roll of bills. He dropped them down my shirt front.

"Here's a month in advance."

Then there was a roar from the crowd. They were coming down the stretch and who was leading by 3? And who won by 4? *Green Moon*. Odds: 6 to 1.

"Shit," I told him, "you cost me a score. *Green Moon* got it all."

"Shut up," he said, "and get busy on my case."

"All right, all right," I said, "where do I contact you?"

"Here's my number," he said, handing me a tiny piece of paper.

Then he got up, walked down the aisle and was gone.

I knew I was in the middle of something big but I couldn't unscramble it. Well, I had to get busy, that's all.

I opened the *Form* and checked out the 5th race.

24

The next day I went down to the Silver Haven Mortuary to check things out there. Damn good business to get into—no slack periods. I parked outside and went in. Nice place. Hushed hall. Thick, dirty rugs. I walked around and into another large room. It was full of caskets. Big ones, little ones, fat ones, thin ones. Some people purchased their caskets ahead of time. Not me. To hell with it.

There didn't seem to be anybody about. I could boost a casket. I could rope it to my car. Drive away. Where was Grovers? Where was anybody?

Then I got a little itch and the itch got worse. And then I did it. I lifted a casket lid and looked inside. I SCREAMED. And slammed the lid.

There had been a naked woman in there. Young, a looker, but dead. Wow!

Hal Grovers came running in.

"BELANE! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

"DOING? DOING? WHAT DO YOU MEAN? WHERE THE HELL *YOU* BEEN, GROVERS?"

"THE MEN'S ROOM. WHAT WERE YOU SCREAMING ABOUT?"

I pointed.

"YOU GOT A STIFF IN THAT CASKET! A BABE! BIG JUGS!"

Grovers walked over and opened the lid.

"There isn't a body in here, Mr. Belane."

"What?"

I walked over and looked. The coffin was empty.

I whirled and grabbed Grovers by the lapels.

"Don't play games with me, baby! I saw it! I saw her *box*! A young dead bimbo! You playing games with me? You and…Billy French…the blood-sucker! I'm not a man to play with, Grovers!"

"Nobody is playing with you, Belane. You're hallucinating."

I let go of his lapels.

"Sorry," I said, "I should have known."

"Known what?"

"It's Jeannie Nitro. She's playing with my mind. She knows I'm on your case."

"I haven't seen her lately. Maybe she's gone."

"She's not gone. She's waiting, Grovers."

"Waiting for what?"

"I don't know right now."

I spun on my heel and looked all around.

"Grovers, quick! How many dead do you have here now?"

"We've prepared two. They are in the Slumber Room."

"I've got to see them!"

"What?"

"You want me to crack this case or not?"

"I want you to…crack it."

"Then I'll have to look at the two stiffs."

"Why?"

"If I told you, you'd never guess."

"What does that mean?"

"Never mind. Now let me have a look."

"This is highly irregular."

"Come on! Come on!"

"Very well. Follow me…"

We went into the Slumber Room. Classy place. Dark. Candles burning. There were three caskets.

"O.k., lemme see," I told Grovers.

"Could you please tell me why?"

"Jeannie Nitro wants to house her space aliens in these dead bodies. Give them a shell, a hiding place. A shell, you know, like a turtle. Nitro is hanging around you to get at these bodies."

“But these are dead bodies, they are in a state of decay. Besides, we are going to bury them. How can they use them?”

“The space aliens hide in the dead bodies until they are buried, then they find other dead bodies.”

“But if they want to hide, why would they use dead bodies? Why wouldn’t they hide in storage tanks or caves or something like that? Why wouldn’t they use live bodies?”

“You fool, the live bodies would react to their presence. Open these caskets, Grovers! I think they are in there now!”

“Belane, I think you’re mad!”

“Go on, open them!”

Grovers opened the first one. Nice oak casket. There was a fellow in there about 38, bushy red hair, dressed in a cheap suit.

I turned and looked at Grovers.

“One of them is in him now.”

“How do you know?”

“I just saw him move!”

“What?”

“I saw him move!”

I reached over and grabbed the man by the neck.

“Come on, come on! Get out of there! I know that you’re in there!”

As I shook the head, the mouth opened a bit and spit out some white cotton.

I jumped back.

“SHIT! WHAT WAS THAT?”

Grovers let out a low moan.

“Belane, I worked for a good hour, padding his cheeks, making him look fulsome and healthy! Now he’s all sagged in again! Now I’ve got to do it all over.”

“Sorry, I didn’t realize. But I think we’re closing in. Open another casket! Please!”

“You open it. This is truly disgusting. I don’t know why I’m allowing this. I must be crazy.”

I walked over and opened a pine casket. I looked. And I kept looking. I couldn’t believe it.

"Is this some kind of joke, Grovers? One doesn't joke in this fashion. It's not funny at all."

The figure stretched out in the casket was me. The casket was lined in velvet and I was smiling a waxy smile. I was wearing a dark brown wrinkled suit and my hands were crossed over my chest and holding a white carnation.

I turned around and faced Grovers.

"What the hell's going on here, baby? Where'd you get this one?"

"Oh, that's Mr. Andrew Douglas, died suddenly of a heart attack. Been a community leader here for some decades."

"That's crap, Grovers. That stiff in there is me! *Me*!"

"Nonsense," said Grovers. He walked over and looked into the coffin.

"It's Mr. Douglas."

I walked over and looked in. It was some old white-haired guy, 70 or 80 years old. He looked pretty good, they had rouged his cheeks and put on just a touch of lipstick. His skin glowed as if they had waxed it. But it wasn't me.

"It's Jeannie Nitro," I said, "she's fucking with us."

"I think you are a very confused man, Mr. Belane."

"Shut up," I said.

I had to think. Somewhere it all fit. It had to fit.

Just then another man entered and stood in the doorway.

"The body has been prepared, Hal."

"Thank you, Billy. You can leave."

Billy French turned and walked out.

"Jesus, Grovers, doesn't he wash his hands?"

"What do you mean?"

"I saw red on his hands."

"Nonsense."

"I saw red."

"Mr. Belane, would you care to look into the third coffin? Although it's empty. A gentleman has selected it in advance."

I turned around and stared at it.

"Is he *in* there, Grovers?"

“No, the gentleman is still alive. It’s a pre-select. We give ten percent off on pre-selects. Would you care for one? We have a lovely selection.”

“Thanks, Grovers, but I have an appointment somewhere…I’ll contact you.”

I spun on my heel and walked out the doorway, down the hall and out into the good, clean air. Any son-of-a-bitch who picks out his own casket is the same son-of-a-bitch who diddles with himself 6 times a week.

I got into my Bug, kicked it over and sliced out into traffic. Some guy in a van thought I had cut him off. He gave me the finger. I gave him the finger back.

It was beginning to rain. I rolled up the good window on the right hand side and snapped on the radio.

25

I took the elevator up to the 6th floor. The psychiatrist's name was Seymour Dundee. I pushed the door open and the waiting room was packed with nuts. One guy was reading a newspaper and holding it upside-down. Most of the others, men and women, sat silently. They didn't even appear to be breathing. There was a heavy dark feel to the room. I signed in at the desk and took my seat. Guy next to me was wearing one brown shoe and one black. "Hey, buddy," he said.

"Yeah," I answered.

"Got change for a penny?" he asked.

"No," I told him, "not today."

"Tomorrow maybe?" he went on.

"Maybe tomorrow," I said.

"But maybe I won't be able to find you tomorrow," he complained.

I hope not, I thought.

We waited and waited. All of us. Didn't the shrink know that waiting was one of the things that drove people crazy? People waited all their lives. They waited to live, they waited to die. They waited in line to buy toilet paper. They waited in line for money. And if they didn't have any money they waited in longer lines. You waited to go to sleep and then you waited to awaken. You waited to get married and you waited to get divorced. You waited for it to rain, you waited for it to stop. You waited to eat and then you waited to eat again. You waited in a shrink's office with a bunch of psychos and you wondered if you were one.

I must have waited for so long that I slept and I must have been awakened by the receptionist shaking me, “Mr. Belane, Mr. Belane, you’re next!”

She was an ugly old gal, she was uglier than I was. She startled me, her face was very close to mine. That’s what death must be like, I thought, like this old gal.

“Honey,” I said, “I’m ready.”

“Follow me,” she said.

I went through the office and followed her up the aisle. She opened a door and here sat this very satisfied looking guy behind his desk, dark green shirt, unbuttoned floppy orange sweater. Dark shades, smoking a cigarette in a holder.

“Sit down,” he motioned to a chair.

The receptionist closed the door and was off somewhere.

Dundee began doodling on a piece of paper with his pen. Looking down at the paper he said, “This is costing you $160 an hour.”

“Screw you,” I said.

He looked up. “Ha! I like that!”

He doodled some more, then said, “Why are you here?”

“I don’t know where to begin.”

“Begin by counting to ten backwards.”

“Screw your mother,” I told him.

“Ha!” said Dundee, “have you had intercourse with yours?”

“What kind? Vocal? Spiritual? Clarify.”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t.”

He made a round hole with the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, then ran the index finger of his right hand in and out of the hole. “Like this,” he said, “hmmm…”

“Yeah,” I said, “I remember, she held her hand up like that once and I did it like that with my finger.”

“Are you here to mock me?” said Dundee. “Do not make fun of me!”

I leaned over the desk toward him, “You’re lucky, buddy, that you’re only getting mocked!”

"Oh," he leaned back in his chair, "is that so?"

"Yeah. Don't toy with me, baby, I am not to be held responsible."

"Please, please, Mr. Belane, what is it you want?"

I slammed my fist down in the center of his desk. "GOD DAMN IT, I NEED HELP!"

"Of course, Mr. Belane, where did you find me?"

"Yellow pages."

"Yellow pages? I'm not in the yellow pages."

"Yes, you are. Seymour Dundee, psychiatrist, Garner Building, room 604."

"This is room 605. I'm Samuel Dillon, lawyer. Mr. Dundee is next door. I'm afraid you've made a mistake."

I stood up and smiled. "You're playing with me now, Dundee, you're trying to get even! If you think you can outmaneuver me, you've got chicken shit for brains!"

I was there to find out if the matter of Celine, the Red Sparrow, Lady Death, Space Aliens, Sam and Cindy Bass was really real or if I was actually having mental problems. I mean, none of it really made sense. Was I out of it? And where was I going with it and why?

The guy who called himself Samuel Dillon pushed a buzzer on his desk and soon the receptionist was back. She was still uglier than I. Nothing had changed.

"Molly," he said, "please escort this gentleman next door to Dr. Dundee's office. Thank you."

I followed her along and out into the hall where she opened door #604 and whispered to me, "Get straight, jerkoff…"

I walked into another packed waiting room. First thing I saw was the fellow with one brown shoe and one black shoe who had asked me for change for a penny. He saw me.

"Hey, Mr.…." he said.

I walked over to him. "Happened to you too, huh?" he asked.

"What?"

"He he…got the wrong door…got the wrong door…"

I turned around then and walked out of there, took the elevator down. Then I waited for it to reach the first floor. Then I waited for the door to open. Then I walked down the hall and out onto the street and found my car. I got in. Started up. Waited for it to get warm. Got to a signal. It was red. I waited. I pushed in the cigarette lighter and waited. The light turned green, the lighter jumped out and I lit my smoke while driving along. I felt like I had better get over to the office. I felt like somebody was waiting for me.

26

I was wrong. There was nobody at the office. I went around and sat behind my desk.

I was feeling peculiar. So many things didn't fit. I mean, in the lawyer's office, why was that man reading his newspaper upside-down? He belonged in the shrink's office. Or maybe just the outside pages of the newspaper were upside-down and he was reading the inside straight-side-up? Was there a God? And where was the Red Sparrow? I had too many things to solve. Getting out of bed in the morning was the same as facing the blank wall of the Universe. Maybe I should go to a nude bar and stick a 5 buck bill into a g-string? Try to forget everything. Maybe I should go to a boxing match and watch two guys beat the shit out of each other?

But trouble and pain were what kept a man alive. Or trying to avoid trouble and pain. It was a full time job. And sometimes even in sleep you couldn't rest. Last dream I had I was laying under this elephant, I couldn't move and he was releasing one of the biggest turds you ever saw, it was about to drop and then my cat, Hamburger, walked across the top of my head and I awakened. You tell that dream to a shrink and he'll make something awful out of it. Because you are paying him excessively, he's going to make sure to make you feel bad. He'll tell you that the turd is a penis and that you are either frightened of it or that you want it, some kind of crap like that. What he really means is that *he* is frightened or wants the penis. It's only a dream about a big elephant turd, nothing more. Sometimes things are just what they seem to be and that's all there is to it. The best interpreter of the dream is the dreamer. Keep your money in your pocket. Or bet it on a good horse.

I had a hit of *sake*, cold. My ears jumped and I felt a little better. I could feel my brain beginning to warm up. I wasn't dead yet, just in a state of rapid decay. Who wasn't? We were all in the same leaky boat, jollying ourselves up. Like, you take Christmas. Yeah, take it the hell out of here. The man who made it up was the man who never carried extra luggage. The rest of us have got to dump most of our junk just to find out where we are. Well, not where we are but where we aren't. The more stuff you dumped the more you could see. Everything worked in reverse. Go backwards and Nirvana leaps into your lap. Sure.

I had another hit of *sake*. I was coming around. Around the bend. Balls away. I was Nick Belane, super dick.

Then the phone rang. I picked it up just like a normal person would pick up a telephone. Well, not quite. Sometimes a phone made me think of an elephant turd. You know, all the shit you hear. A phone is a phone but what comes through it is another matter.

"You're a lousy philosopher," said Lady Death.

"For me," I told her, "I'm perfect."

"People live on their delusions," she said.

"Why not?" I suggested. "What else is there?"

"The end of them," she said.

"Well, hell," I said.

"Hell yourself," said Lady Death. "What's happening with the Celine caper?"

"Baby, I've got it all worked out."

"Clue me, fat boy."

"I want you to meet me at Musso's tomorrow afternoon at 2:30."

"All right. But you better have something. Do you?"

"Babe, I can't tip my hat."

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Sorry. I mean, I can't tip my *hand*."

"You better have something…"

"I'll bet my life on it," I told her.

"You just did," said Lady Death, hanging up.

I put the phone down, stared at it a while. I picked an old cigar out of the ashtray, lit it, gagged.

Then I picked up the phone and punched out Celine's number.

It rang four times. Then I heard his voice.

"Yeah?"

"Sir, you've won a 2 pound box of chocolate covered cherries and a free trip to Rome."

"Whoever you are, don't fuck with me."

"This is Nick Belane…"

"I'll take the chocolates…"

"I want you to meet me at Musso's tomorrow afternoon at 2:30."

"Why?"

"Just show up, Frenchy, and your troubles will be over."

"You buying?"

"Yes."

"I'll be there…"

He hung up.

Nobody ever said goodbye anymore. Not in our world.

I stared at the *sake*.

Then went for it.

27

It was 2:15 p.m. I was holding down a table at Musso's. I had a vodka-7 in front of me. Celine and Lady Death were about to meet. Two of my clients. Business was good, it was just without direction. Guy in the booth across the way kept staring at me. Some people stared, you know, like cows. They didn't know that they were doing it. I took a hit of my vodka, put it down, looked up. Guy was still staring. I'll give him two minutes, I thought, then if he doesn't stop, I'm going to bust his sack.

I got up to a minute and 45 seconds and then the guy stood up and started walking toward my table. I checked my holster. It was there. Snug. The best hard-on a man could have. Guy looked like a parking lot attendant. Or maybe a dentist. He had an ugly mustache and a false smile. Or maybe it was a false mustache and an ugly smile. He got close to my table, stopped, loomed there.

"Look, buddy," I said, "I'm sorry, I don't have any loose change."

"I'm not hittin' you for coin, baby," he said.

He made me nervous. He had eyes like a dead fish.

"What's your ache, then?" I asked him. "They throw you out of your motel room?"

"Naw," he said, "I live with my mother."

"How old are you?"

"46," he told me.

"That's sick."

"No, *she* is. Incontinent. Rubber diapers. The whole bit."

"Oh," I said, "I'm sorry."

"Me too."

He just loomed there.

"Well," I said, "I don't know what I can do about that."

"You can't do nothing…"

I finished my drink.

"I just wanted to ask you," he said, "I just wanted to ask you something."

"O.k. O.k. Do it."

"Aren't you Spike Jenkins?"

"Who?"

"Spike Jenkins. You used to fight out of Detroit, heavyweight. I saw you fight Tiger Forster. One of the greatest fights I ever saw."

"Who won?" I asked.

"Tiger Forster."

"I'm not Jenkins. Go sit down back where you were."

"You wouldn't shit me? You're not Spike Jenkins?"

"Never was."

"Well, I'll be damned."

He turned around, walked back to his booth and sat down again, just like I told him to.

I looked at my watch. It was right on 2:30. Where were they?

I signaled the waiter for another drink…

At 2:35 Celine walked in. He stood there a moment, looking about. I waved my napkin on a fork. He walked over, sat down.

"I'll have a scotch and soda," he said. His timing was good. The waiter was just arriving with my 2nd drink. I gave the waiter the order.

I drank my drink right off. I was feeling odd. Like nothing mattered, you know. Lady Death. Death. Or Celine. The game had worn me down. I'd lost my kick. Existence was not only absurd, it was plain hard work. Think of how many times you put on your underwear in a lifetime. It was appalling, it was disgusting, it was stupid.

Then the guy from the booth was looming there again. He looked at Celine.

"Hey, ain't this guy here with you, ain't he Spike Jenkins?"

"Sir," Celine looked at him, "if you value your balls in their present shape, please go away quickly."

The guy left again.

"All right," said Celine, "why am I here?"

"I am going to bring you into contact with Lady Death."

"So, death is a lady, eh?"

"Sometimes…"

Celine's drink arrived. He poured it right down.

"This Lady Death," he asked, "are we going to expose her?"

"You ever see Spike Jenkins fight?"

"No."

"He looked like me," I told him.

"That doesn't seem to be much of an accomplishment."

Then *she* walked in. Lady Death. She was dressed to kill. She walked over to our table, put it down on the chair.

"Whiskey sour," she said.

I nodded the waiter over. Gave him the order.

"I really don't know how to introduce you two because I'm not sure who either of you are," I told him.

"What kind of dick are you?" Celine asked.

"The best in L.A."

"Yes? What's L.A. stand for?"

"Lost Assholes."

"You been drinking?"

"Recently," I answered.

Lady Death's whiskey sour arrived. She slammed it down. Then looked at Celine.

"So, introduce yourself. What's your name?"

"Spike Jenkins."

"Spike Jenkins is dead."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

I nodded the waiter over and ordered 3 more drinks.

Then we just sat and looked at each other.

"Now," I said, "what we have here is a stalemate, a definite stalemate. Meanwhile, I'm buying all the drinks. So, let's make a little bet and the one who loses buys the next round."

"What kinda bet?" asked Celine.

"Oh, something simple, like how many numbers on your driver's license. I mean the numbers which indicate the license itself."

"Sounds stupid," said Celine.

"Be a sport," I said.

"Don't be chicken," said Lady Death.

"Well, I'll have to guess," said Celine.

"Take a shot," I said.

"Give it your best, baby," said Lady Death.

"O.k.," said Celine, "I'll say 8."

"I'll take 7," said Lady Death.

"I'll take 5," I said.

"Now," I said, "let's look at our licenses, let's have a look."

We dug them out.

"Ah," said Lady Death, "mine has 7!"

"Damn it," I said, "mine has 7."

"Mine has 8," said Celine.

"That can't be," I said, "here, let me have a look."

I reached out and took his license. I counted.

"Yours has 7. You counted the letter which precedes the numbers. That's what you did. Here, look…"

I handed the license to Lady Death. There were 7 numbers and also some other information: LOUIS FERDINAND DESTOUCHES, b. 1894-.

God damn. I began to tremble all over. Not large trembles but good sized ones. With great will power I brought them down to a rather continuous shiver. All too much. It was *him*, sitting there with us at a table in Musso's in an afternoon which was leaning toward the 21st century.

Lady Death was ecstatic, that's all, ecstatic. She looked truly beautiful, glowing all over.

“Gimme my god-damned driver’s license,” said Celine.

“Sure, big boy,” said Lady Death, smiling, handing it back.

“Well,” I said to Celine, “looks like both you and I lost. So we’ll flip a coin to decide who buys, o.k.?”

“Sure,” said Celine.

I got out my lucky quarter, flipped it up in the air and yelled at Celine: “Call it!”

“Tails!” he yelled.

It hit the table and sat there. Heads.

I picked up the quarter and put it back into my pocket. “Somehow,” I said to Celine, “I have a feeling that this isn’t going to be your day.”

“It’s going to be my day,” said Lady Death.

And like that, the drinks arrived.

“Put these on my tab,” Celine told the waiter.

We sat there with our drinks.

“Somehow I feel like I’ve been taken,” said Celine.

He slugged his drink down.

“They warned me about you L.A. creeps.”

“You still practice medicine?” I asked him.

“I’m gettin’ out of here,” he said.

“Ah, come on,” said Lady Death, “have another drink. Life is short.”

“No, I’m gettin’ the hell out of here!”

He tossed a 20 on the table, got up and walked toward the exit, then was gone.

“Well,” I said to Lady Death, “he’s gone…”

“Not quite,” she said.

There was a sound, the sound of screeching brakes. There was a loud thump, like metal hitting flesh. I jumped up from the table and ran outside. There in the middle of Hollywood Boulevard was the still body of Celine. A fat woman in a big red hat, who had been driving the ancient Olds, got out and screamed and screamed and screamed. Celine was very still. I knew that he was dead.

I turned around and walked back into Musso’s. Lady D. was gone. I sat back down at the table. My drink was untouched. I took care of that. Then I just sat there. The good die old, I thought. Then I just sat there some more.

“Hey, Jenkins,” I heard a voice, “all your friends are gone. Where’d all your friends go?”

It was the Loomer. He was still there.

“What’re you drinking?” I asked.

“Rum and coke.”

I got the waiter. “Two rum and cokes,” I said, “one for me and,” I pointed, “one for him.”

The drinks arrived. The Loomer sat with his in his booth and I sat with mine at my table.

I heard the siren then. It’s when you don’t hear it, it’s for you.

I drank my drink, got my tab, paid with my card, tipped 20% and got out of there.

28

The next day at the office I put my feet up on my desk and lit a good cigar. I considered myself a success. I had solved a case. I had lost two clients but I had solved a case. But the slate wasn’t clean. There was still the Red Sparrow. And the Jack Bass matter with Cindy. And there was still Hal Grovers and that space alien, Jeannie Nitro. My thoughts jumped between Cindy Bass and Jeannie Nitro. It was pleasant thinking. Anyhow, it beat sitting in a duck blind waiting for them to fly over.

I got to thinking about solutions in life. People who solved things usually had lots of persistence and some good luck. If you persisted long enough, the good luck usually came. Most people couldn’t wait on the luck, though, so they quit. Not Belane. No candyass, he. Top flight. Game. A bit lazy, perhaps. But crafty.

I pulled open the top right hand drawer, found the vodka and allowed myself a hit. A drink to victory. The winner writes the history books, is surrounded by the lovely virgins…

The phone rang. I picked it up. “Belane, here.”

“You haven’t seen the last of me,” the Lady said. It was Lady Death.

“Look, baby, can’t we cut a deal?”

“It’s never been done, Belane.”

“Let’s break precedent, let’s give it a shot, Lady.”

“No dice, Belane.”

“Well, O.k., but how about giving me a date, you know, a D.O.D.?”

“What’s that?”

"Date of Demise."

"What good would that do?"

"Lady, I could prepare myself."

"Every human should anyhow, Belane."

"Lady, they don't, they forget it, they ignore it or they're just too stupid to think about it."

"That doesn't concern me, Belane."

"What concerns you, Lady?"

"My job."

"Me too, Lady, my job concerns me."

"Well, good for you, fat boy. This call was just to let you know that I haven't forgotten you…"

"Ah, thanks so much, Lady, you've really cheered up my day."

"See you later, Belane…"

She hung up.

There's always somebody about to ruin your day, if not your life. I put out my cigar, put on my derby, went to the door, locked it, walked to the elevator and took it down. Out on the street I just stood there watching them walk around. My gut began to turn and I walked half a block down to a bar, The Eclipse, walked in, took a stool. I had to think. I had cases to solve and I didn't know where to begin. I ordered a whiskey sour with beer chaser. Actually, I felt like laying down somewhere and sleeping for a couple of weeks. The game was getting to me. At one time there had been some excitement. Not much, but some. You don't want to hear it. Married three times, divorced three times. Born and ready to die. Nothing to do but try to solve cases nobody else would touch. Not for my fee.

Guy at the end of the bar kept looking at me. I could feel him looking. The place was empty except for me, him, the barkeep. I finished my drink and called the bartender over for another. All he had was a lot of hair on his face.

"Same thing, huh?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, "only stronger."

"For the same price?" he asked.

"Whatever is possible," I answered.

"What's that mean?"

"You don't know, barkeep?"

"Naw…"

"Well, while you're making my drink, think about it."

He walked off.

The guy at the end caught my eye, waved, yelled, "How ya doin', Eddie?"

"I'm not Eddie," I told him.

"You look like Eddie," he said.

"I don't give a fuck if I look like Eddie or not," I answered.

"You lookin' for trouble?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, "you gonna bring it?"

The barkeep brought my drink, took some of the money I'd left on the bar, said, "I don't think you're a nice man."

"Who told you you could think?" I asked.

"I don't have to serve you," he said.

"You don't want the money, I'll keep it."

"I don't want it *that* bad…."

"How bad do you want it, tell me…"

"DON'T SERVE HIM NO MORE!" yelled the guy at the end of the bar.

"One more word out of you and I'm gonna stick my foot up your ass! They'll be sucking red bubbles out of your cheeks with a rubber tube."

The guy just smiled a weak smile. The bartender was still standing there.

"Look," I said to him, "I just walked in here for a quiet, peaceful drink and everybody starts to give me a lot of crap! By the way, have you seen the Red Sparrow?"

"The Red Sparrow? What's that?"

"You'll know it when you see it. Hell, never mind…"

I finished my drink and got out of there. It was better on the street. I just walked along. Something had to give and it wasn't going to be me. I began counting each fool that passed me. I got up to 50 in two-and-one-half-minutes, then stepped into the next bar.

29

I walked in and took a stool. The barkeep walked up.

"Hi, Eddie," he said.

"I'm not Eddie," I told him.

"I'm Eddie," he said.

"You don't want to play with me," I told him.

"No, you do it," he said.

"Look, barkeep, I'm a peaceful man. Fairly normal. I don't sniff armpits or wear ladies' underwear. But everywhere I go, somebody is pushing shots at me, they give me no rest. Why is this?"

"I think you got it comin', somehow."

"Well, Eddie, you stop thinking and see if you can fix me a double vodka and tonic, touch of lime."

"We don't got no lime."

"Yeah, you have. I can see it from here."

"That lime's not for you."

"Yeah? Who's it for? Elizabeth Taylor? Now, if you want to sleep in your own bed tonight, I'll have that lime. In my drink. Pronto."

"Yeah? What ya gonna do? You and whose army?"

"One more word out of you, boy, and you're gonna have a breathing problem."

He stood there looking at me, deciding whether to call my card or not. He blinked, then sensibly moved off and began working on my drink. I watched him carefully. No tricks. He brought the drink back.

"I was kidding, mister, can't you take a joke?"

"Depends upon how it's told."

Eddie walked off again, stood down at the far end of the bar.

I lifted the drink, slammed it down. Then I pulled out a bill. I took the lime, squeezed it onto the bill. Then I rolled the bill around it, then rolled it down the bar toward the barkeep. It stopped in front of him. He looked down at it. I slowly stood up, did a little neck exercise, turned and walked out. I decided to go back to the office. I had work to do. My eyes were blue and nobody loved me but myself. I walked along humming my favorite bit from "Carmen."

30

I unlocked the door to my office, swung it open, and there she was: Jeannie Nitro, sitting on my desk, legs crossed, kicking her heels.

"Belane, you pitiful drunk, how ya doing?" she smiled.

She looked great. I could see where Grovers was in trouble. What did it matter if she was a space alien? The way she looked you wanted more of them around. But Grovers was my client. I had to do this one in, off her, move her out of the picture. I never got any rest. I was always on the hustle for somebody.

I swung around my desk, flopped on my chair, tossed my derby onto the hat rack, lit a cigar and sighed. Jeannie just sat on the desk, kicking her legs.

"To answer your question, Jeannie, I'm doin' all right."

"I've come to make a deal with you, Belane."

"I'd rather hear a Scarlatti sonata."

"How long since you had a woman?"

"Who cares?"

"You should."

"Suppose I don't?"

"Suppose you do?"

"You offering me your bod, Jeannie?"

"Maybe."

"What's the maybe? Either you do or you don't."

"The bod is part of the deal."

"Which is?"

Jeannie popped off the desk and began walking the rug. She looked good walking the rug.

"Belane," she said while still walking, "I'm the first wave of an invasion force from Space. We are going to take over the earth."

"Why?"

"I'm from the planet Zaros. We are overpopulated. We need the earth for our excess people."

"Well, why in the hell don't you come on in? You look just like humans. Nobody would ever know."

Jeannie stopped walking and faced me.

"Belane, we don't look like this. What you are seeing is only a mirage."

Jeannie came over and sat down on my desk again.

"What do you really look like?" I asked.

"This," she said.

There was a flash of purple light. I looked down on my desk. There was this *thing*. It looked like an above average size snake, only it was covered with coarse hair and at its center was a round, moist glob with a single eye. The head had no eyes, only a thin mouth. It was truly a hideous looking thing. I grabbed the telephone, raised it high and brought it down hard. I missed. The thing had slithered to one side. It crawled down along the rug. I ran after it to crush it with my shoe. There was another flash of purple light and then Jeannie stood there again.

"You fool," she said, "you tried to kill me. Don't anger me or I'll take you out!"

Her eyes were blazing.

"O.k., baby, o.k., I just got kind of confused. Sorry."

"All right, forget it. Now, we are an advance force sent to scout the earth for our excess population. But we feel it would only be sensible to align some of you humans to our Cause. Like you."

"Why me?"

"You're the perfect type, you're gullible, self-centered and have no character."

"What's with Grovers? Why him? Why the dead bodies? How does he fit?"

Jeannie laughed.

“He doesn’t. We just *landed* there. I became somewhat attached to him, just a mild flirtation, something to do….”

“And me? You got the hots for me, baby?”

“You’re usable for the Cause.”

She moved toward me. I was totally entranced. Her body was against mine, we pressed together. We embraced and our mouths joined. Her tongue darted into my mouth, it was hot and wiggled like a small snake.

I pushed her away.

“No,” I said, “I’m sorry, I can’t!”

She looked at me.

“What is it, Belane? You too old?”

“It’s not that, baby…”

“What is it?”

“I don’t want to hurt your feelings…”

“Tell me, Belane…”

“Well, you might turn into that ugly thing again with the bump in the middle and that one eye…”

“Why you fat fuck, Zaronians are beautiful!”

“I didn’t think you’d understand…”

I walked back around my desk, sat down, pulled open the drawer, found the pint of vodka, unscrewed the cap, had a hit.

“How’d ya land?” I asked Jeannie.

“Space tube.”

“Space tube, huh? How many of you?”

“6.”

“I don’t know if I can help you, baby…”

“You’ll help me, Belane.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You’re dead.”

“Christ, first Lady Death. Now you. All you ladies do is threaten me with death. Well, maybe I’ll have something to say about that!”

I reached into the drawer for the luger. I had it in my hand. I pulled off the safety catch and leveled the gat at her.

“I’ll blow you all the way back to Zaros, baby!”

“Go ahead, pull the trigger!”

“What?”

“I said, pull the trigger, Belane!”

“You think I won’t?”

I could already feel some sweat at my temples.

“You think I won’t?” I repeated.

Jeannie just smiled at me.

“Pull the damned trigger, Belane!”

My whole face was a mass of sweat.

“Please go back to Zaros, sweetheart!”

“NO!”

I pulled the trigger. There was a roar of sound and the gun kicked back in my hand. I rubbed the sweat away from my eyes and looked.

Jeannie was standing there smiling at me. I looked closer. She had something in her mouth. It was the bullet. She had caught the bullet with her teeth. She walked toward the desk, stopped. Then she spat the bullet out into my ashtray.

“Baby,” I said, “we can make a lot of money with that trick! We can team up! We can be rich! Think of it!”

“I wouldn’t think of it, Belane. That would be a misuse of my powers.”

I took another hit of my vodka. I had a real problem here with Jeannie.

“Now,” said Jeannie, “I am enlisting you for our Cause, the Cause of the Zaros, whether you like it or not. We are still revising our plan to inhabit the earth. You’ll be contacted and advised at our discretion.”

“Look, Jeannie, can’t you get anybody else for this goddamned thing?”

She smiled.

“Belane, you have been Selected!”

There was a flash of purple light and she was gone.

31

I got Grovers on the phone. He was in.

"How's business, Grovers?"

"Steady," he said, "no recession here."

"Your case with Jeannie Nitro, it's closed. She won't be bothering you any more. I'll mail you a bill for final charges."

"Final charges? You trying to stiff me?"

"Grovers, I got this alien babe off you. Now you pay up."

"All right, all right…but how'd you do it?"

"Trade secret, baby."

"All right, I suppose I should be grateful."

"Don't suppose, just be. And pay your bill unless you want to be using one of your pine boxes. Or, do you prefer walnut?"

"Well, let's see…" he began.

I sighed and hung up.

I put my feet up on the desk. I was making progress. Now all I had to do was to nail Cindy Bass's ass and locate the Red Sparrow. Of course, Jeannie Nitro was now *my* problem. I was my own client. But Celine and Grovers were history. In a sense I was beginning to feel truly professional. But before I could relax, Lady Death entered my mind again. She was still there.

The phone rang, I picked it up. It was Lady Death.

"I'm still here, Belane."

"Why don't you take a vacation, babe?"

"I can't. I enjoy my work too much."

"Listen, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Do you just work the earth?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I mean, does your work include, say, uh…space aliens?"

"Of course. Space aliens, worms, dogs, fleas, lions, spiders, you name it."

"That's nice to know."

"What's nice to know?"

"That you work space aliens."

"You bore me, Belane."

"I'm glad of that, baby."

"Listen, I've got some work to do…"

"Just answer me one question…"

"Maybe. What is it?"

"How do you kill a space alien?"

"No problem."

"A bullet won't do it. What do you use?"

"That's a secret of the trade, Belane."

"You can tell me, baby, my lips will be forever sealed."

"Fat boy," she said just before hanging up, "I might take care of that for you."

I put the phone down and put my feet back on the desk. Christ, 6 space aliens on the prowl and enlisting me for the Cause. I should notify the authorities. Sure, lot of good that would do. I had to solve it myself. Seemed damned tough. Maybe I ought to sit on it for a while. I uncapped the vodka and had a little nip. After all, there was still the Red Sparrow and Cindy Bass. I took out a coin and flipped it: heads, Red Sparrow; tails, Cindy Bass. It came up tails. I smiled, leaned back in my chair and thought about her: Cindy Bass. Nailing it.

32

Well, to celebrate my progress as probably the greatest detective in L.A. I closed the office, took the elevator down and hit the street. I tried walking south, did, hit Sunset Boulevard and strolled along. Problem with Sunset, in my neighborhood, there weren't many bars. I walked along. Finally found one, half-a-class place. I didn't feel like sitting on a stool. I took a booth. Here came the waitress. She had on a mini-skirt, high heels, see-through blouse with padded brassiere. Everything was too small for her: her outfit, the world, her mind. Her face was hard as steel. When she smiled it hurt. It hurt her and it hurt me. She kept smiling. That smile was so false the hairs on my arms rose. I looked away.

"Hi, honey!" she said, "watcha havin'?"

I didn't look at her face. I looked at her midriff. It was exposed. She had a little paper rose, red, pasted across her bellybutton. I talked to the paper rose.

"Vodka and tonic with lime."

"Sure, honey!"

She minced off, trying to roll her buns attractively. It didn't work.

At once, I began to get depressed.

Don't, don't, Belane, I said to myself.

It didn't take. Everybody was screwed. There were no winners. There were only apparent winners. We were all chasing after a lot of nothing. Day after day. Survival seemed the only necessity. That didn't seem enough. Not with Lady Death waiting. It drove me crazy when I thought about it.

Don’t think about it, Belane, I said to myself.

It didn’t take.

The waitress arrived with my drink. I put down a bill. She picked it up.

“Thanks, honey!”

“Wait,” I said, “bring me the change.”

“There isn’t any change.”

“Then, consider your tip included.”

She opened her eyes large. They were blank.

“What’re you, a god-damned cowboy?”

“What’s a cowboy?”

“You don’t know what a god-damned cowboy is?”

“No.”

“That’s somebody who wants a free ride.”

“You think that up yourself?”

“No. That’s what the girls call them.”

“What girls? The cowgirls?”

“Mister, you got a bug up your ass or what?”

“It’s most probably ‘what.’”

“MARY LOU!” I heard this loud voice, “THAT ASSHOLE GIVING YOU TROUBLE?”

It was the bartender, a little guy with beetle brows.

“Don’t worry, Andy, I’ll handle this asshole.”

“Yeah, Mary Lou,” I said, “you’ve probably handled a lot of assholes.”

“WHY YOU COCKSUCKER!” she screamed.

I saw Beetle Brows vaulting the bar. Good trick for a guy his size. I slammed my drink down and rose to meet him. I ducked under his right and dug my knee into his privates. He dropped, rolling on the floor. I kicked him in the ass and walked out onto Sunset Boulevard.

My luck in bars was getting worse and worse.

33

So I went to my place and drank and there went that day and that night.

I awakened about noon, eliminated some waste, brushed my teeth, shaved, mused. Didn't feel too bad. Didn't feel too much. I got dressed. I put on an egg, let it boil. I drank a glass of half-tomato and half-ale. I let the egg run under cold water, peeled it, ate it and then I was as ready as I would ever be.

I picked up the phone and got Jack Bass at his office. I told him who I was. He didn't seem happy with me.

"Jack," I told him, "remember that Frenchman I told you about?"

"Yeah? What about him?"

"I got him out of the way."

"How?"

"He's dead."

"Good. Was he the one?"

"Well, he was in contact with her."

"Contact? What the hell you mean by that?"

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Try me, Belane."

"Listen, I'm trying to nail Cindy's ass. That's why you hired me. Right?"

"I don't know why I hired you. I think it was a mistake."

"Jack, I got the Frenchman. He's dead."

"So where do we stand?"

"He can't bang her."

"Did he?"

"Jack…"

"Did you? All this 'nail her ass' shit! Are you a pervert?"

"Look, I got a tight tail on Cindy. We want hard evidence."

"There you go again!"

"We're closing in, Jack. It won't be long. Trust me."

"Then there was more than the Frenchman?"

"I think so."

"You think so? You think so? Hell, I'm paying you good money. It's been weeks and all you can tell me there's a dead Frenchman and 'I think so'? You're just spinning your wheels! I want action! I want evidence! I want this thing busted wide open!"

"Within 7 days, Jack."

"You've got 6."

"6 days, Jack."

There was silence at his end. Then he spoke again.

"All right. I'm leaving for the airport in an hour. Got business back east. I'll be back in 6 days."

"Everything will be solved, baby."

"Don't call me baby. What's this 'baby' shit?"

"Just a manner of speaking…"

"You clean up this mess or I'll see you in hell, motherfucker!"

"You talking to me, Jack?"

I was holding a silent telephone. He'd hung up on me. The prick. Well…it was time to get busy…

34

So, there I was, parked outside of Bass's place, a third of a block down. It was evening, no it was night, about 8 p.m. Cindy's red Mercedes was in the drive. I had a hunch I was onto something. Something was going to happen. There was a smell in the air. I put my cigar out. I picked up my car phone and dialed out for the results of the 9th race. Lost again. Life was wearing. I felt oppressed, wasted. My feet hurt.

Cindy was probably in there watching something stupid on tv, crossing her warm legs and laughing at something inane and obvious. Then I began thinking about Jeannie Nitro and her five space buddies. They wanted to enlist me. I was no sell-out. I had to break up that gang. There had to be a way. Maybe if I could find the Red Sparrow, the Red Sparrow would sing me the answer. Was I crazy? Was all this happening?

I picked up the phone and dialed in John Barton. He was there.

"Listen, John, this is Belane. I'm having trouble closing in on the Red Sparrow. Maybe you better get another man."

"No, Belane, I have faith in you, you'll do it."

"You really think so?"

"I have no doubt of it."

"Well, I'll stay on the case then."

"Right."

"I'll contact you if I get onto anything."

"Do that. Good night."

He hung up. Nice guy.

I started to relight my cigar. I almost spit it out. Cindy Bass was walking out of the house. She moved to her car. Got in.

Baby, baby, lead me to it.

She started up, turned on her lights, backed out of the drive. She swung around, headed north. I followed a half a block or so back. Then she turned onto the main boulevard, Pacific Coast Highway, to be exact. She headed south. I was about 3 car lengths back. She went across an intersection and the light turned red on me. I had to go through. It was close but no hit. I heard the horns and somebody called me an asshole. People lacked originality.

Then I was 3 car lengths behind her again. She was in the right hand lane. She began to slow down, then she turned into a driveway, a motel driveway. *Honeydunes Motel*. Sweet. She pulled in and parked at #9. I drove down to #7, parked, cut my lights and waited.

She climbed out, walked up the path, up to the door and knocked. The door opened and a guy stood there.

Ah, Cindy!

The guy stood in the light and I could make him out. He looked good. I don't mean to me. But to her, he must have. He was young. Blank smooth face with thin eyebrows, lots of hair. In fact, looked like he had a little pigtail. You know the kind. It was braided. A real jackass. They embraced in the doorway. Some kind of kiss. I heard Cindy laugh. Then she walked in and the door was closed.

I grabbed my camcorder and walked down to the office. Walked in. There was nobody there. There was a little desk. A bell. I hit the bell. Nothing. I hit the bell real hard, 6 times.

Somebody came walking out. An old fart. He was barefooted, dressed in a long nightgown and a stocking cap.

"Ah ha," I said, "you're ready for a good little old sleep, huh?"

"Maybe I am, maybe I'm not. What's it to you?"

"No offense, sir. I need a room. Do you have a vacancy?"

"You a pimp?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"You sell drugs?"

"No, sir."

“Wish you did. I need some coke.”

“I’m a bible salesman, sir.”

“That’s disgusting!”

“Just trying to spread the word.”

“Well, don’t spread that shit around me.”

“As you wish.”

“Fucking-A!”

“Well, sir, I need a room.”

“We got two. #8 and #3.”

“Did you say #8?”

“I said, #8 and #3. Don’t you hear right?”

“I’ll take #8.”

“35 bucks. Cash.”

I peeled the money off. He grabbed it, slammed down a key.

“Don’t I get a receipt?”

“A what?”

“A receipt.”

“Spell it.”

“I can’t.”

“Then you don’t get it.”

I took the key, got out of there, walked down to #8, unlocked the door. Nice looking place. If you were homeless.

I found a glass in the kitchen. Brought it out and put it up against the wall facing #9. Luck. I could hear them.

“Billy,” I heard Cindy Bass say, “let’s not rush it. I want to talk a little first.”

“We can talk afterwards,” said Billy. “I got this ramrod here and I got to do something with it. I need flesh, not words!”

“I want to shower first, Billy.”

“Shower? What ya been doin’, working in the garden?”

“Ah, Billy, you’re so funny!”

“All right, go shower! I’ll throw some icewater on this cobra!”

“Ah, Billy, hahaha!”

I smiled for the first time in weeks.

I was going to nail her.

35

I kept the drinking glass pressed to the wall and kept listening. I heard the shower water running. Poor Bass, he had been right. But everybody was right, and wrong, and upside-down. But what did it really matter who screwed who? It was finally all so drab. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Well, people got attached. Once you cut the umbilical cord they attached to other things. Sight, sound, sex, money, mirages, mothers, masturbation, murder and Monday morning hangovers.

I put the glass down, reached into my coat, found the half pint of gin, had a little nip. That always cleared the bugs out of the mind.

I began to think about another line of work. Here I was going to bust in and camcord a screw scene and I just didn't have any taste for it. It was just a job, the rent, the booze, just waiting for the last day or night. Marking time. What crap. I should have been a great philosopher, I would have told them how foolish we were, standing around sucking air in and out of our lungs.

Damn, I was getting gloomy. I had another little hit of gin, then put the glass back to the wall. She must have just been coming out of the shower.

"Holy Christ," he said, "you're stacked like ten brick shithouses!"

"Ah, Billy, you really think so?"

"I just told ya, didn't I?"

"You say the sweetest things, Billy."

"I mean, looka the *size* of them breasts! You should fall forward flat on your face but I guess it's your big ass holds you back from doing that."

"Oh, I don't have a big behind, Billy."

"Baby, that's no behind! That there thing is a dump truck full of jelly, jam and dumplings!"

"But, Billy, how about *me*? What about what's *inside* of me?"

"Baby, can't you see this thing throbbing and leaping around in front of me? *I'll* be *inside* of you!"

"Billy, I think I've changed my mind…"

"Baby, you got nothing to change! Come here! Climb onto this Tower of Power!"

I pulled the glass from the wall, checked my camcorder, slipped out the door and moved over to the porch of #9. Their door lock was easy. Got it open with my Visa card.

I heard the springs begging for mercy in the bedroom. I switched the camcorder on and rushed in there. I got it. Billy was banging away like ten rabbits. Somehow, he noticed me. He rolled off and leaped to the floor. His mouth was hanging open. He was quite surprised and then he was quite pissed. Naturally.

He looked at me.

"Shit, what's this. What the FUCK is this?"

Cindy was sitting up in bed.

"He's a dick, Billy. He's crazy. He busted in on me and Jack working out and started camcording us. He's a real nut, Billy."

I looked at her.

"You shut up, Cindy! This is it! I've finally nailed your ass!"

Billy moved toward me.

"Hey, buddy, you think I'm going to let you out of here alive?"

"Oh, hell yes, Billy boy, I'm not going to have any problem leaving, no problem at all."

"Says who?"

"Says my friend here."

I pulled the.32 out from my shoulder holster.

"That damned thing ain't going to stop me."

"Try me, jerk!"

He kept slowly moving toward me.

"I've killed 3 men, Billy boy. 4 won't matter a twit!"

"Liar, liar," he smiled, moving toward me, "your mother's pants are on fire!"

"One more step, fart-head, and it's over!"

He took the step. I fired.

He just stood there. Then he reached down into his belly button and pulled the bullet out. There wasn't any blood, not even a bruise.

"Bullets mean nothing to me," he said, "and neither do you."

He took the gun out of my hand and tossed it into the corner of the bedroom.

"Now it's just me and you," he said.

"Look, friend, let's talk this over. You can have the camcorder. I'm retiring from this business. You'll never see me again."

"I know I won't because I'm going you kill you!"

"Yeah," said Cindy from the bed, "kill the filthy creep!"

I looked over.

"You stay out of this, Cindy, this is between the gentleman and myself."

I looked at Billy.

"Right, Billy?"

"Right," he answered.

Then he picked me up and hurled me across the room. I hit the wall and dropped to the floor.

"Billy," I said, "let's not let a big ass that half this town has been into cause hard feelings between us!"

Billy laughed and moved toward me.

36

Then it came to me. This guy was one of the space aliens. That's why he hadn't felt the bullet.

I got up and backed against the wall.

"I got your number, Billy!" I yelled.

He stopped. "Yeah, tell me about it."

"You're a space alien!"

Cindy laughed. "I told you this guy was a nut!"

I looked at Cindy. "This guy is nothing but a snake-like thing with fur and one big eye. He's hiding in what appears to be a human body, but it's a mirage."

Billy just stood there looking at me.

"Where'd you meet this guy, Cindy?" I asked.

"At a bar. But I don't believe your shit. He's no space alien."

"Ask him."

Cindy laughed again. "O.k., Billy, are you a space alien?"

"Huh?" he answered.

"You see, you see!" I told Cindy.

Billy looked at her. "You gonna believe this nut?"

"Of course not, Billy. Now, go ahead, finish him off!"

"O.k., baby…"

Billy moved toward me. Then there was a flash of purple light in the room and Jeannie Nitro stood there.

"Jeannie," said Billy, "I…"

"Shut up, you bastard!" said Jeannie.

"What the hell's going on here?" Cindy asked, starting to get dressed. Billy was still balls-ass naked.

"You bastard," said Jeannie, "I told you that there would be no fraternizing with the humans!"

"Baby, I couldn't help myself, I got the hots. I was sitting in a bar one night and this number walked in."

"Yours orders were No Sex with the Earthlings!"

"Jeannie, you know that you're the one for me. It's just that you've been busy and all…"

"You've had it, Billy!" She pointed her right hand toward him.

"No, Jeannie, no!"

There was a purple flash and instantly Billy was turned into a furry snake with one moist eye and began wriggling rapidly across the floor. Once again Jeannie's right hand pointed at him, there was another flash and a roar and then Billy the space alien was gone.

"I can't believe what I've seen!" said Cindy.

"Yeah," I said, "I know."

Then Jeannie looked at me. "Don't forget, Belane, you've been selected for the Cause, the Cause of Zaros."

"Yeah," I said, "I can't forget."

Then there was a third flash of light and Jeannie was gone.

Cindy was now fully dressed but still in a state of shock.

"I can't believe what I've seen here."

"Baby, Jack hired me to clean up your mess and that's what I've done."

"I've got to get out of here!" she said.

"You do that. And don't forget what I've got on this camcorder here. You stay in line or I turn it over to Jack."

"All right," she sighed, "you win."

"I'm the greatest dick in L.A. You gotta know that now."

"Look, Belane, I've got something I can give you for that camcorder."

"Huh?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, no, Cindy, you can't buy me. Nice try, though."

"Well, screw you, fat boy!" she said. She turned and walked toward the door. I watched those unbelievable haunches moving.

“Cindy!” I said, “wait a minute!”

She turned, smiling. “Yes?”

“Never mind. Go ahead…”

Then she was out the door.

I walked into the bathroom and relieved myself and I don’t mean I had a bowel movement. But I was a true professional. Another case solved.

37

The next day at the office I got Jack Bass on the phone.

“You still want to divorce Cindy, Jack?”

“I dunno. You got anything on her?”

“Let’s put it this way. The two gentlemen she had contact with are now dead.”

“Contact. What the hell do you mean by ‘contact’?”

“Jack, please, these guys are dead now, there was a Frenchman and a space alien.”

“A space alien? What kinda crap you feeding me?”

“No crap, Jack. We’ve been invaded by a few space aliens from Zaros. She met one of them in a bar. Pretty well-hung chap.”

“He’s dead now?”

“Yeah, him and the Frenchman, like I said.”

“You kill people?”

“Jack, these guys are gone. Cindy’s not going to play anymore. You can relax.”

“How do I know she’s not going to play anymore?”

“Don’t worry. I got an ace. She’s not going to play.”

“You got something on your camcorder she doesn’t want me to see, is that it?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Let’s just say I can nail her ass with this if she does.”

“But I want her to be with me because of me, not because of some blackmail.”

“Blackmail, schmackmail, Jack, she’s not going to play anymore. I got rid of her contacts and she’s gonna keep her panties on. What more can you ask? Maybe she’ll even get to like you. Give her a chance to come around. She's young, she needed a fling, what the hell."

"With a space alien?"

"Be glad. Nobody will ever know who he was. It's almost like it didn't happen."

"But it did. You say he was well-hung? How well-hung was he?"

"Hard to tell. He was working…"

"You watched?"

"I stopped it."

"How about the Frenchman? Was he well-hung too?"

"Jack, both those guys are dead. Forget it. You'll be getting my bill in the mail in a couple of days."

"There's something about all this that doesn't rest well with me."

"She's not going to play anymore, Jack."

"But suppose she does?"

"She won't because she knows I can nail her ass."

"There you go again. You weren't banging her, were you?"

"Jack, Jack, Jack, please! I'm a professional."

"And these guys are dead? How do I know this?"

"Jack, you'll know by the way she behaves. Now stop worrying. You got anything else you want me to solve? I'm the best dick in L.A."

"I don't have anything right now."

"O.k., Jack, have a nice day."

"Sure, sure…"

I hung up.

I opened the desk drawer and got out the vodka, had a hit. Things were working out. Now all I had to do was to find the Red Sparrow. And stop from getting too involved with the space aliens. Or Lady Death.

I had another hit of vodka. And allowed myself to feel all right. For a while.

38

Next I got John Barton on the phone. He ran a printing company up north.

"Belane here, John…"

"Good to hear from you, Nick. How's it going?"

"A little slow, John. I need some more information about this Red Sparrow."

"Well, we want to make the Red Sparrow the logo of our company. Make it really well known. But now I've heard there is another Red Sparrow out there somewhere. We need to find it if it's there."

"Is that all you're going on?"

"Well, maybe also a…hunch…"

"You ever seen this Red Sparrow?"

"I hear that it's been sighted."

"You hear? You hear where?"

"Secret sources. I can't divulge too much."

"Suppose I find this bird? What do you want me to do? Cage it?"

"No, just get me some real evidence that it exists. To satisfy my curiosity."

"Suppose I never find this bird?"

"You'll find it if it's there. I have faith in you."

"Listen, this is the screwiest case I've ever been on."

"I've always told the world that you were a great detective. You'll prove it for me. You'll find the Red Sparrow."

"All right, John. I'll work on it. But I'm not a kid anymore. I wake up tired. I think I've lost a few steps."

"You're in your prime. You can do it."

"All right, John, I'll give it a go…"

"Great!"

I put the phone down. Well, that was it. But where would I begin?

I decided to try the nearest bar.

It was around 3 p.m. I found a stool and sat down. The bartender came up. Lonely looking guy. Didn't have any eyelids. Had little green crosses painted on his fingernails. Some kind of nut. There was no avoiding them. Most of the world was mad. And the part that wasn't mad was angry. And the part that wasn't mad or angry was just stupid. I had no chance. I had no choice. Just hang on and wait for the end. It was hard work. It was the hardest work imaginable. I forced myself to look at the bartender.

"Scotch and water," I said.

He just stood there.

"Scotch and water," I repeated.

"Oh," he said. Then he trotted off.

I saw her walk in out of the corner of my eye. Why do they say "corner of the eye"? Eyes have no corners. Anyhow, I saw her walk in. An old friend. She took the stool to my right.

"Hello, sucker," she said, "you buying?"

"Sure, baby."

It was Lady Death.

"Hey, boy!" I yelled down at the barkeep, "make that two!"

"Huh?" he asked.

"Make that two scotch and waters, please."

"Uh, o.k.," he said.

"Whatcha been doin', fat boy?" Lady asked.

"Solving cases, as per custom."

"Meaning slow or never."

"No, baby, no, you see, I'm the best dick in L.A."

"That's not saying much."

"It beats churning butter left-handed."

"Don't sass me, fat boy, or I'll take you out like a light bulb."

"Sorry, baby, my nerves are shot. Maybe a drink will help."

And there was the barkeep putting them down before us.

"What happened to your eyelids?" Lady asked him.

"My gas heater exploded this morning…"

"How ya gonna sleep tonight?"

"I'll wrap a towel around my head."

"Couldn't you do that now?" I asked.

"Why?" he asked.

"Never mind…" I paid for the drinks.

I raised my drink. Lady lifted hers.

"Long life," Lady said.

"Yeah, long life," I said.

We clicked the glasses and drank.

I reordered…

We'd been sitting there about 30 minutes when somebody else walked in. Another woman. She walked around and sat herself on the stool to my left. Two women meant twice as much trouble as one woman. Now I had trouble on either side. I was in the vise. I was screwed.

The other woman was Jeannie Nitro.

I got the barkeep to make another scotch and water.

"Nicky," she whispered, "I've got to talk to you. Who's that bitch sitting with you?"

"You'd never guess," I said.

Then Lady Death was whispering to me, "Who's that bitch?"

"You'd never guess," I said.

The drink came and Jeannie tossed it off.

"Well," I said, "I guess it's time for introductions…"

I turned to Lady Death.

"Lady, this is Jeannie Nitro…"

Then I turned to Jeannie.

"Jeannie, this is Lady…Lady…"

"Lady d'Heat," Lady supplied.

They stared at each other.

Now this, I thought, could prove to be very interesting.
I waved the barkeep down for refills…

39

Here, basically, I was sitting between Space and Death. In the form of Woman. What chance did I have? Meanwhile, I was supposed to locate a Red Sparrow that maybe didn't exist. I felt very odd about everything. I had never expected to get tangled up like this. I hardly understood the why of it. What could I do?

Play it cool, fool, came the answer.

O.k.

The drinks had arrived.

"Well, ladies, here's to you!"

We clicked glasses and had a hit.

Why couldn't I be just some guy sitting watching a baseball game? Involved in the outcome. Why couldn't I be a fry cook scrambling eggs and acting detached? Why couldn't I be a fly on some person's wrist, crawling along sublimely involved? Why couldn't I be a rooster in a chicken pen pecking at seed? Why this?

Jeannie nudged me with her elbow, whispered, "Belane, I've got to talk to you…"

I put some bills on the bar. Then I looked at Lady Death.

"I hope this doesn't piss you but…"

"I know, fat boy, you've got to talk to the lady alone. Why should that piss me? I'm not in love with you."

"But you always seem to be hanging around me, Lady."

"I hang around everybody, Nick, you are just more aware of me."

"Yeah. Yeah."

"Well, you helped me with Celine…"

"Yes, Celine…"

"So, I'll leave you alone for a while with your lady. But only for a while. You and I have some unfinished business, so I'll be seeing you."

"Lady d'Heat, I have no doubt of that…"

She finished her drink and rose from her stool. She turned and walked toward the door. Her beauty was foreboding. Then she was gone.

The barkeep came down for his money.

"Who was that?" he asked. "I got kind of dizzy when she walked by."

"Be glad you only felt dizzy," I told him.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe it," I said.

"Try me," he said.

"I don't have to. Now look, give me a little space here, I want to talk to this lady."

"All right. But just tell me one thing."

"O.k."

"How come a fat ugly guy like you gets all the action?"

"It's because of the buttermilk I put on my waffles. Now, get the hell out of here."

"Don't get fresh, buddy," he said.

"You asked."

"But you didn't have to get nasty!"

"If you think that was nasty, just keep hanging around."

"Fuck you," he said.

"That was brilliant," I said. "Now move off while you can."

He slowly moved down to the end of the bar, stood there a moment, then scratched his ass.

I turned back to Jeannie.

"Sorry, baby, but I seem to get into these negative dialogues with almost every bartender I meet."

"It's all right, Belane."

She looked sad.

"Belane, I'm going to have to leave."

“Oh, that’s o.k., but have one for the road.”

“No, I mean I’m going to have to leave, the people I have with me are going to have to leave…the earth. I don’t know why, but I got kind of fond of you.”

“That’s understandable,” I laughed, “but why is your gang leaving the earth?”

“We’ve thought it over, it’s just too awful. We don’t want to colonize your earth.”

“What’s too awful, Jeannie?”

“The earth. Smog, murder, the poisoned air, the poisoned water, the poisoned food, the hatred, the hopelessness, everything. The only beautiful thing about the earth is the animals and now they are being killed off, soon they will be gone except for pet rats and race horses. It’s so sad, no wonder you drink so much.”

“Yeah, Jeannie. And don’t forget our atomic stockpiles.”

“Yes, you’ve dug yourself in too deep, it seems.”

“Yes, we could be gone in two days or we might last another thousand years. We don’t know which and so it’s hard for most people to care about anything.”

“I’m going to miss you, Belane, *and* the animals…”

“I don’t blame you for leaving, Jeannie…”

I saw the tears form in her eyes.

“Please don’t cry, Jeannie, damn it all…”

She reached out for her drink, drank it down, looked at me with eyes I had never ever seen anywhere else nor would I ever see the like of them again.

“Goodbye, fat boy,” she smiled.

And then she was gone.

40

So, there I was the next day, back at my office. One assignment left: locate the Red Sparrow. Nobody was beating at my door with new work for me to do. That was fine. It was a time for a tabulation, a tabulation of myself. All in all, I had pretty much done what I had set out to do in life. I had made some good moves. I wasn't sleeping on the streets at night. Of course, there were a lot of good people sleeping in the streets. They weren't fools, they just didn't fit into the needed machinery of the moment. And those needs kept altering. It was a grim set-up and if you found yourself sleeping in your own bed at night, that alone was a precious victory over the forces. I'd been lucky but some of the moves I'd made had not been entirely without thought. But all in all it was a fairly horrible world and I felt sad, often, for most of the people in it.

Well, to hell with it. I pulled out the vodka and had a hit.

Often the best parts of life were when you weren't doing anything at all, just mulling it over, chewing on it. I mean, say that you figure that everything is senseless, then it can't be quite senseless because you are aware that it's senseless and your awareness of senselessness almost gives it sense. You know what I mean? And optimistic pessimism.

The Red Sparrow. It was like the search for the Holy Grail. Maybe the water was too deep for me. And too hot.

I had another hit of vodka.

There was a rap on the door. I took my feet off the desk.

"Come on in."

The door opened and there stood this guy, slight of build, dressed in raggedy-ass clothing. There was a smell to him. Something like kerosene. I wasn't sure. He had small slitted eyes. He moved toward me sidewise. Then he stopped, right at the edge of my desk, leaned forward. He had a slight head twitch.

"Belane," he said.

"Perhaps," I answered.

"I got it all here for you," he said.

"Good," I said, "now take it the hell out of here."

"Easy, Belane, I got the word."

"Yeah? What's the word?"

"Red Sparrow."

"Tell me more."

"We know you're looking for it."

"'We,' huh? Who's 'we'?"

"Can't say."

I got up, walked around the desk, grabbed him by his pitiful shirt front.

"Suppose I make you say? Suppose I kick it out of you?"

"Can't. I don't know."

Somehow, I believed him. I let go. He almost fell to the floor. I walked around, sat behind my desk again.

"My name's Amos," he said, "Amos Redsdale. I can put you on the road to the Sparrow. You want it?"

"What is it?"

"An address. She knows about the Sparrow."

"How much?"

"75 dollars."

"Screw you, Amos."

"O.k., you don't want it? I gotta go. I gotta make the first post. I got a tip on the daily double."

"50 bucks."

"60," said Amos.

"All right, let me have the address."

I dug out 3 twenties and he handed me a slip of paper. I opened it and read it. It said: “Deja Fountain, apt. 9, 3234 Rudson Drive. W.L.A.”

“Look, Amos, you could write any kind of shit here you want. How do I know this is any good?”

“You just go there, Belane. It’s good stuff.”

“For the sake of your ass, Amos, it had better be.”

“I gotta make first post,” he said. Then he turned, walked to the door and was gone.

And I was sitting there out 60 bucks and holding a piece of paper.

41

I waited until that night, drove over, parked outside. Nice neighborhood. Definition of a nice neighborhood: a place you couldn't afford to live in. I had a nip of vodka, slid out of the seat, locked the door and walked up to the apartment complex. I pushed the button by the nameplate: Deja Fountain. The voice came through, sweet but with just an edge: "Yes?"

"For Deja Fountain. Regarding the Red Sparrow. Sent by Amos Redsdale. My name is Nick Belane."

"Sir, I don't know what the hell you are talking about."

"Shit."

"What?"

"Nothing. I've been taken…"

"I was just jesting with you, Nicky. Please enter."

There was a loud buzzing sound. I tried the front door. It opened. I walked along the plush rug until I found apartment 9. What was it about 9? There seemed something dangerous about it. But most numbers worried me. I only liked 3, 7 and 8 or combinations thereof.

I pressed the button. I heard footsteps. Then the door opened.

She was a stunner. In a red dress. Green eyes. Long dark brown hair. Young. Class. Ass. A smell of mint. Her lips smiled.

"Mr. Belane, please come in."

I followed her into the room. Then there was a hard object in my back.

"Freeze, motherfucker! Except your arms! Stretch them up! See if you can reach the ceiling, motherfucker!"

"You black?" I asked.

"What?"

"Only blacks say 'motherfucker.'"

He was patting me down. He found my piece, took it.

"All right, you can turn around now, Mr. Belane."

I turned and looked at him. Big guy but white.

"But you're white," I said.

"So are you," he said.

"Well, I'll be a motherfucker," I said.

"That's up to you. You can have your piece when you leave."

I followed Deja into another room. She waved me to a chair.

It was a big room. Cold. Felt dangerous.

Deja placed herself on the couch, pulled out a small cigar, unsheathed it, licked it up a touch, bit off the end, lit up, exhaling a sexy blue plume of smoke. She fixed me with her green eyes.

"I understand you're looking for the Red Sparrow."

"Yes, for a client."

"Who is?"

"That's confidential."

"I have the feeling that we can be good friends, Mr. Belane, very good friends."

"You do, huh?"

"You're a handsome man, in your way, you must know that. You have that well-lived-in look. It's quite becoming. Most men don't live well at all, they just wear down."

"Is that right?"

"You can call me Deja."

"Deja."

"Ummm…why don't you come over here and sit near me?"

I moved it over and dropped it near her on the couch. She smiled.

"Care for a drink?"

"Sure. Got a scotch and soda?"

"Bernie," she said, "one scotch and soda, please."

A few moments passed and here came the motherfucker who had taken my piece. He set the drink down before me on the coffee table.

"Thank you, Bernie."

He moved off, vanished.

I had a hit of the scotch. Not bad. Not bad.

"Mr. Belane," she said, "I've been told to tell you that you must forget all about the Red Sparrow."

"I never drop a case unless my client so desires."

"You'll drop this one, Mr. Belane."

"Uh-uh."

"Does my smoking this cigar offend you?"

"Uh-uh."

"Would you like to try a drag?"

"Uh huh."

Deja handed me the cigar. I took a good pull, inhaled, exhaled, gave the cigar back. The room was clear for a moment, then the walls began to shift a bit, the rug rose up, fell back down. A shot of blue light flashed in front of me. Then her mouth was on mine. She kissed me, then pulled away. She laughed.

"How long has it been since you've had a woman, Belane?"

"I can't remember…"

She laughed again and then her mouth was on mine again. It had been a long time. Her tongue slithered into my mouth like a snake. Her body was like a snake.

Then I heard footsteps, a voice: "HOLD IT!"

It was Bernie. He was standing there with two guns, one in each hand. One of the guns I recognized as mine.

"O.k., Bernie, o.k.," I said.

Bernie was inhaling heavily as if there were no oxygen in the air. He was staring at Deja. His eyes were misted.

"DEJA," he said, "YOU KNOW THAT I LOVE YOU! I'LL KILL HIM! I'LL KILL YOU! I'LL KILL MYSELF!"

I was in a perfect position. I swung my right leg up and got him right between the nodules. He screamed and dropped, holding his center. I picked up the guns, put one in my holster, held the other in my right hand. I lifted him with my left and dropped him into a chair. I pulled his head back by the hair until his mouth fell open. Then I slid the gun into his mouth.

"Suck on this awhile, chap, while I think about what I'm going to do."

Bernie made a gurgling sound.

"Don't kill him!" said Deja. "Please don't kill him!"

"What do you know about the Red Sparrow, motherfucker?" I asked him.

He didn't answer.

I shoved the gun deeper into his mouth. Then I heard him fart. It was a loud fart. And a stinking one. I pulled the gun out and threw him to the floor.

"That was disgusting! *Don't ever do that again!*"

I turned and looked at Deja.

"Does he have a room here?"

"Yes."

I looked at Bernie.

"Now, you go to your room and stay there until I tell you to come out!"

Bernie nodded.

"Now get going," I told him.

He got to his feet and slumped off, went around the corner. Soon I heard a door close.

Deja had put out her cigar. She was no longer smiling.

"O.k., baby," I said, "let's get back to where we left off."

"I don't want to."

"What? Why? You had your tongue halfway down my esophagus."

"I'm afraid of you, you're too violent."

"But he said he was going to kill you, didn't you hear him?"

"He probably didn't mean it."

"You don't go on 'probably' when love and guns are in hand."

Deja sighed.

"I'm worried about Bernie. He's sitting in his room all alone."

"Doesn't he have a tv? Crossword puzzles? A comic book?"

"Please, Mr. Belane, please leave!"

“Baby, I want to get to the bottom of this Red Sparrow thing.”

“Not tonight…not tonight.”

“When then?”

“Tomorrow night. Same time.”

“Send Bernie to a movie or something.”

“All right.”

I reached down, grabbed my drink, finished it off. I left her sitting on the couch, staring at the rug. I closed the door behind me, walked down the hall, out the front door and back to my car. I got in and kicked the engine over. I sat and let it warm up. It was a warm moonlight night. And I still had a hard-on.

42

I drove down to a bar where I hadn't been in trouble yet—Blinky's. It looked fair at first glance: lots of leather booths, fools, darkness, smoke. A congenial deadliness floated in the air. I found a booth, sat down. Waitress arrived dressed in some silly outfit—pink playsuit with cotton pushing up her breasts. She smiled a horrible smile, showed one gold tooth. Her eyes read empty.

"What'll it be, honey?" her voice grated.

"Two bottles of beer. No glass."

"Two bottles, honey?"

"Yeah."

"What brand?"

"Something Chinese."

"Chinese?"

"Two bottles of Chinese beer. No glass."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Yes."

"You gonna drink both those beers?"

"I hope so."

"Then why don't you drink one, then order another? Stay cold that way."

"I just want to do it this way. There's a reason, I guess."

"You find out that reason, honey, you tell me…"

"Why should I tell you? Maybe I want to keep it to myself."

"Sir, you know, we don't have to serve you. We reserve the right to refuse service to anybody."

"You mean, you won't serve me because I'm ordering two Chinese beers and not telling you why?"

"I didn't say we wouldn't serve you. I said we reserve the right not to."

"Look, the reason is security, a subconscious need for security. I had a rotten childhood. Two bottles at once fills a void that needs filling. Maybe. I'm not sure."

"Honey, I'm going to tell you something. You need a shrink."

"All right. But until I get one, can I have two bottles of Chinese beer?"

A big guy in a dirty white apron walked up.

"What's the trouble here, Betty?"

"This guy wants two bottles of Chinese beer. Without a glass."

"Betty, he's probably waiting for a friend."

"He doesn't have a friend, Blinky."

Blinky looked at me. He was another big fat guy. He was two big fat guys.

"Don't you have a friend?" he asked me.

"No," I answered.

"Then what do you want with two bottles of Chinese beer?"

"I want to drink them."

"Why don't you order one, finish it, then order another?"

"I'd rather do it this way."

"I never heard of that," said Blinky.

"Why can't I do it? Is it against the law?"

"No, it's just strange, that's all."

"I told him he needs a shrink," said Betty.

They both stood there looking at me. I took out a cigar and lit it up.

"That thing stinks," said Blinky.

"So do your excreta," I said.

"What?"

"Bring me," I said, "three bottles of Chinese beer. No glass."

"This guy is a nut," said Blinky.

I looked at him and laughed.

Then I said, “Don’t talk to me again. And don’t do anything, anything at all to irritate me or I’ll blow your lips right off your fucking face, buddy boy.”

Blinky froze. He looked like he was going to have a bowel movement.

Betty stood there.

A minute passed. Then Betty said, “What’ll I do, Blinky?”

“Get him three bottles of Chinese beer. No glass.”

Betty left for the beers.

“Now you,” I said to Blinky, “you sit yourself down across from me. I want you to watch me drinking these three Chinese beers.”

“Sure,” he said, sliding himself, somehow, into the booth across from me.

He was sweating. All three of his chins were trembling.

“Blinky,” I asked him, “you haven’t seen the Red Sparrow, have you?”

“The Red Sparrow?”

“Yes, the Red Sparrow.”

“Haven’t seen it,” said Blinky.

Betty was arriving with the Chinese beers.

At last.

43

So there I was the next night, standing outside of the apartment complex. My shoes were shined and I'd only had 3 or 4 beers. A light, slightly ominous rain was falling. "God is pissing," we used to say when it rained when I was a kid. I felt tired, I mean in body and mind. I wanted out of the game. I wanted to retire. Say to some place like Vegas. Hanging around the gaming tables, looking wise. Watching fools blow fortunes. That was my idea of a good time. Relaxing under the lights as the grave yawned open for me. But, hell, I didn't have any money. And I had to find the Red Sparrow. I pressed the buzzer to apartment 9. I waited. I pressed the buzzer again. Nothing. Oh my. Oh my my my. I didn't want to think about it. Had they skipped? Deja and that motherfucker. I should have closed on them last night. Had I let them slip?

I lit my cigar with one hand, worked the door-jimmy with the other. It slid open and I entered the hall. I walked down to 9. Pressed my ear to the door. Nothing. Not even the rustle of a mouse. Oh my. God damn it. I worked the door open and entered. Walked straight to the bedroom, opened the closet. Empty. Clothes gone. Nothing but lonely hangers. What an awful sight. My first link to the Red Sparrow now turned into 32 empty hangers. I had lost it. As a dick I was a fool. I thought faintly about suicide, dismissed that, reached into my coat, found the pint, had a hit of vodka, spit out my cigar.

Then I turned around, walked out of there, down the hall and along the hall until I found what I wanted. The door marked: MANAGER, M. TOHIL

I knocked.

"Yeah?" came this reply. Sounded like another big guy.

"Flowers, Mr. Tohil. Flower delivery for M. Tohil!"

"How'd you get in here?"

"The front door was open, Mr. Tohil."

"Impossible!"

"Mr. Tohil, a lady was leaving and I walked in the door as she walked out."

"You're not supposed to do that."

"I didn't know that. What was I supposed to do?"

"You're supposed to buzz me from outside and tell me who you are and what you want."

"All right, Mr. Tohil. I'll go outside and buzz you and tell you that I have a flower delivery for you. Will that be all right?"

"Never mind, boy. Here…"

The door swung open. I jumped inside, kicked the door closed and grabbed him by the belt. I had a handful. He was a *big* guy. Needed a shave. Smelled a little like sulfur. Tipped the scales about 240.

"What the fuck you doing? Where are the flowers? Take your hand off my god-damned belt!"

"Easy, Tohil," I let go of him, "I'm a private investigator, fully licensed. I want to know the whereabouts of Deja Fountain, apartment 9."

"Kiss my ass, buddy, and get the hell out of here."

I backed off.

"Easy, Mr. Tohil. I just want this information, then I'll go."

"The information is private and you'll go without it. I'm moving you out of here now!"

"I've got a black belt, Tohil. That's a lethal weapon. Don't force me to use it!"

He laughed and moved a step toward me.

"Hold it right there!" I yelled.

He stopped.

"Tohil, I've got to locate the Red Sparrow, and Deja Fountain ties in with the solution. I've got to know where she and her boy have gone."

"They didn't leave a forwarding address," he said. "Now get out of here before I fart in your face!"

I slipped the.32 out and leveled it at his belly.

"WHERE'S DEJA FOUNTAIN?" I yelled.

"Screw you," he said, moving toward me.

"Stop right there!" I commanded.

He kept coming, he was a fool. I panicked, pulled the trigger.

The gun jammed.

Then he had his hands about my throat. They were the size of hams, hams with huge, dumb, strong, relentless fingers. I couldn't breathe. Large flashes of light roared in my head behind my eyes. I pounded my knee into his groin. Nothing happened. He was a freak. His sexual organs were some place else, maybe up under one of his arm pits. I was helpless. I could feel death in the air. But my past life didn't flash before me. Just a voice in my head said, "You need a new tire on the right rear…" Stupid, stupid. And I was finished, done. It was over for me.

Then, suddenly I felt the hands let go. I staggered back, sucking in air from the stratosphere and everywhere else.

I looked at Tohil. He didn't look good. He didn't look good at all. He was looking at me but he wasn't looking at me. I saw him grab his left arm. He held his left arm and this awfully pained look crossed his face. He gasped, looked up and fell to the floor.

I went over, bent over him, felt his pulse. Nothing. He was gone. Bye bye.

I walked over, sat in a chair. And there on the couch across from me, there she was: Lady Death. Never had she looked so good. What a babe. Never let you down. Better than gold. She smiled.

"How ya doin', Belane?"

"Can't complain, exactly, Lady."

She was dressed completely in black. She looked good in black. Also red.

"Better watch your weight, Belane. You've been eating too many french fries, mashed potatoes, desserts…you've been sucking at beer bottles…"

"Yeah. Well…yeah…"

She smiled again. Perfect strong teeth. She could bite through a plumber's monkey wrench.

"Well," she said, "I've got to go. Some more business near at hand."

"Anybody I know?"

"You know a Harry Dobbs?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, if you do, forget him."

Then she was gone. Like that.

I walked over to Tohil, dug for his wallet. There was a 50, 2 twenties, a 5 and a one. I slipped them into my right pants pocket. I walked to the door, opened it, closed it and walked down the hall. Nobody around. I got to the front door, stepped outside. The light rain was still falling. It felt good against my face. I inhaled, sighed, moved toward my car. It was still there. I walked around to the rear of it and checked the right rear tire. Sure enough, it was bald. I needed new rubber.

44

So, there I was depressed again. I drove back to my place, got in and opened a bottle of scotch. I was back with my old friend, scotch and water. Scotch is a drink you don't take to right off. But after you work with it a while it kind of works its magic on you. I find a special touch of warmth to it that whiskey doesn't have. Anyhow, I had the glooms and I sat in a chair with the 5th at my side. I didn't turn on the tv, I found that when you felt bad that son-of-a-bitch only made you feel worse. Just one vapid face after another, it was endless. An endless procession of idiots, some of them famous. The comedians weren't funny and the drama was 4th grade. There wasn't much to turn to for me, except the scotch.

The light rain had become a hard rain and I sat there listening to it belt against the roof.

I should never have let those fuckers slip away. And I knew I'd never find my original informant again. I was back at the beginning. The Red Sparrow had vanished from my stupid grasp. Here I was 55 years old and still fumbling in the dark. How long could I stay in the game? Did the inept deserve anything but a kick in the ass? My old man had told me, "Get into anything where they hand you the money first and then hope to get it back. That's banking and insurance. Take the real thing and give them a piece of paper for it. Use their money, it will keep coming. *Two* things drive them: greed and fear. *One* thing drives you: opportunity." Seemed like good advice. Only my father died broke.

I poured a new scotch.

Hell, I'd even failed with women. Three wives. Nothing really wrong each time. It all got destroyed by petty bickering. Railing about nothing. Getting pissed-off over anything and everything. Day by day, year by year, grinding. Instead of helping each other you just sliced away, picked at this or that. Goading. Endless goading. It became a cheap contest. And once you got into it, it became habitual. You couldn't seem to get out. You almost didn't want to get out. And then you did get out. All the way.

So, now, here I was. Sitting listening to the rain. If I died right now there wouldn't be one tear dropped anywhere in the world. Not that I wanted that. But it was odd. How alone could a sucker get? But there was a world full of old farts like me. Sitting listening to the rain, wondering where it all went. That's when you knew you were old, when you sat wondering where it went.

Well, it doesn't go anywhere, it's not supposed to. I was three quarters dead. I flicked on the tv. There was a commercial. LONELY? DEPRESSED? CHEER UP. PHONE ONE OF OUR BEAUTIFUL LADIES. THEY DESIRE TO SPEAK TO YOU. CHARGE IT TO YOUR MASTER OR VISA CARD. SPEAK TO KITTY OR FRANCI OR BIANCA. PHONE 800-435-8745.

They showed the girls. Kitty looked best. I took a hit of scotch and dialed the number.

"Yeah?" It was a man's voice. Sounded mean.

"Kitty, please."

"You 21 or over?"

"Over," I said.

"Master or Visa?"

"Visa."

"Gimme your number and expiration date. Also, address, phone number, social security and your driver's license number."

"Hey, how do I know you won't use this information for your own good? I mean, like screwing me around? Using this info for your own gain?"

"Hey, buddy, you want to talk to Kitty?"

"I guess so…"

"We advertise on tv. We been in business for 2 years."

"All right, let me dig this stuff out of my wallet."

"Buddy, if you don't want us, we don't want you."

"What's Kitty going to talk to me about?"

"You'll like it."

"How do you know I'll like it?"

"Hey, buddy…"

"All right, all right, wait a minute…"

I gave him the info. There was quite a pause while they cleared my credit. Then I heard a voice.

"Hi, baby, this is Kitty!"

"Hello, Kitty, my name is Nick."

"Oooh, your voice is so *sexy*! I'm getting a little excited!"

"Nah, my voice isn't sexy."

"Oh, you're just being modest!"

"No, Kitty, I'm not modest…"

"You know, I feel very *close* to you! I feel like I'm curled up in your lap, I'm looking up at you with my eyes. I have large blue eyes. You're leaning close, like you're about to kiss me!"

"That's crap, Kitty, I'm sitting here alone sucking on a scotch and listening to the rain."

"Listen, Nick, you have to use your imagination just a little. Let go and you'll be surprised what we can do together. Don't you like my voice? Don't you find it a little…ah, *sexy*?"

"Yeah, a little but not too much. You sound like you got a cold. You got a cold?"

"Nick, Nick, my dear boy, I'm too *hot* to have a cold!"

"What?"

"I said, I'm too *hot* to have a cold!"

"Well, you sound like you've got a cold. Maybe you smoke too many cigarettes."

"I only smoke *one thing*, Nick!"

"What's that, Kitty?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Nah…"

"Look down at yourself, Nick."

"O.k."

"What do you see?"

"Drink. Telephone…"

"What else, Nicky?"

"My shoes…"

"Nick, what's that *big thing* sticking out there as you talk to me?"

"Oh, that! That's my *gut*!"

"Keep talking to me, Nick. Keep listening to my voice, think of me there in your lap, my dress slipped up a bit, my knees and thighs showing. I have long blond hair. It showers down over me. Think of all that, Nick, think of it…"

"All right…"

"O.k., now what do you *see*?"

"Same things: telephone, my shoes, my drink, my gut…"

"Nick, you're bad! I've got a good mind to come over there and spank you! Or maybe I'll let you *spank me*!"

"What?"

"*Spanky, spanky, Nick*!"

"Kitty…"

"Yes?"

"Will you pardon me for a minute? I have to go to the bathroom."

"Oh Nick, I know what you're going to *do*! But you don't have to go to the *bathroom* to do it, you can do it right over the *phone* while you're *talking* to me!"

"No, I can't, Kitty. I gotta take a piss."

"Nick," she said, "you can consider our conversation over!"

She hung up.

I went to the bathroom and urinated. As I did, I could still hear the rain going. Well, it had been a lousy conversation but at least it had taken my mind off of the Red Sparrow and other matters. I flushed, washed my hands, stared into the mirror, winked at myself and walked back out to the scotch.

45

So there I was, back at the office the next day. I was feeling unfulfilled and, frankly, rather crappy about everything. I wasn't going anywhere and neither was the rest of the world. We were all just hanging around waiting to die and meanwhile doing little things to fill the space. Some of us weren't even doing little things. We were vegetables. I was one of those. I don't know what kind of vegetable I was. I felt like a turnip. I lit a cigar, inhaled, and pretended that I knew what the hell.

The phone rang. I picked it up.

"Yeah?"

"Mr. Belane, you have been selected as one of our prize winners. Your prize can be a tv set, a trip to Somalia, $5,000 or a folding umbrella. We have a free room for you, a free breakfast. All you have to do is attend one of our seminars where we will offer you an unlimited real estate value…"

"Hey, buddy," I said.

"Yes, sir?"

"Go hump a rabbit!"

I hung up. I stared at the phone. Deathly damned thing. But you needed it to call 911. You never knew.

I needed a vacation. I needed 5 women. I needed to get the wax out of my ears. My car needed an oil change. I'd failed to file my damned income tax. One of the stems had broken off of my reading glasses. There were ants in my apartment. I needed to get my teeth cleaned. My shoes were run down at the heels. I had insomnia. My auto insurance had expired. I cut myself every time I shaved. I hadn't laughed in 6 years. I tended to worry when there was nothing to worry about. And when there was something to worry about, I got drunk.

The phone rang again. I picked it up.

“Belane?” this voice asked.

“Maybe,” I answered.

“Maybe my ass,” the voice went on, “either you’re Belane or you’re not Belane.”

“All right, you got me. I’m Belane.”

“All right, Belane, we hear you’re looking for the Red Sparrow.”

“Yeah? What’s your source?”

“Our source is private.”

“So are your parts but you can expose them.”

“We choose not to.”

“All right,” I said, “so what’s the play?”

“$10,000 and we’ll put the Red Sparrow into your hand.”

“I don’t have the ten.”

“We can put you in touch with someone who can let you have it.”

“Really?”

“Really, Belane. Only 15% interest. A month.”

“But I don’t have any collateral.”

“Sure you have.”

“What?”

“Your life.”

“That all? Let’s talk.”

“Sure, Belane. We’ll be at your office. Ten minutes.”

“How’ll I know it’s you?”

“We’ll tell you.”

I hung up.

Ten minutes later there was a knock on the door. A loud knock. The whole door rattled and shook. I checked my desk drawer for the luger. It was there, pretty as a picture. A nude one.

“It’s open, for Christ’s sake, come on in!”

The door swung open. A huge body blocked the light. An ape with a cigar and a light pink suit. He was with two smaller apes.

I motioned him to a chair. He sat in it, completely filling it. The chair legs gave a bit. One ape flanked him on each side.

The main ape belched, leaned forward a bit toward me.

"I'm Sanderson," he said, "Harry Sanderson. These," he nodded toward his cohorts, "are my boys."

"Your sons?" I asked.

"Boys, boys," he said.

"Yeah," I said.

"You need us," said Sanderson.

"Yeah," I said.

"The Red Sparrow," said Sanderson.

"Are you connected with that babe and her mongrel boy who skipped their apartment the other night?"

"I ain't tied to no babe," he said. "I just use them for one thing."

"What's that?" I asked.

"To mop my poop deck."

Each of his apes giggled. They had thought that cute.

"I don't think that's cute," I said.

"We don't care," said Sanderson, "what you think."

"That makes sense," I said. "Now, let's talk about the Red Sparrow."

"$10,000," said Sanderson.

"Like I said, I don't have it."

"And like I said, we get a Loaner to give it to you, easy terms, 15% a month."

"O.k., get me the Loaner."

"We're the Loaner."

"You?"

"Yeah, Belane. We give it to you, you then hand it back. Then you pay 15% often grand each month until the loan is fully repaid. All you do is sign this piece of paper. No money really changes hands. We just keep it, to save you from handing it back."

"And for this, you'll…"

"Put the Red Sparrow right in your hand."

"How do I know this?"

"Know what?"

"That you'll put the Sparrow in my hand."

"You gotta trust us."

"That's what I thought you said."

"You don't, Belane?"

"What?"

"Don't trust us."

"Sure but it's better you trust me."

"Like what?"

"Put the Sparrow in my hand *first*."

"What? What do we look like to you, a bunch of wooden dummies?"

"Well, yes…"

"Don't get wise, Belane. You've got to trust us if you want to see the Red Sparrow. It's your only chance. Think about it. You've got 24 hours."

"All right, let me think."

"Think, Belane," the big ape in the pink suit stood up. "Think real good. And let us know. You've got 24 hours. After that, the deal is off. Forever."

"O.k.," I said.

He turned around and one of his apes ran ahead and opened the door for him. The other one stood there looking at me. Then they all left. And I sat there. I had no idea. The ballgame was in my lap. And the clock was running. What the hell. I reached into my desk for the pint of vodka. It was lunch time.

46

Well, what are you going to do? I worried so much that I fell asleep at my desk. When I awakened it was dark. I got up, put on my coat and my derby and got out of there. I got in my car and drove 5 miles west. Just to do it. Then I parked it and looked around. I was parked in front of a bar. *Hades*, said the neon sign. I got out of the car, went in. There were 5 people in there. 5 miles, 5 people. Everything was coming up 5s. There was a bartender, a babe and these 3 thin limp stupid kids. The kids seemed to have shoeblack in their hair. They smoked long cigarettes and sneered at me, at everything. The babe was at one end of the bar, the kids at the other, the bartender in the middle. I finally got the bartender's attention by picking up an ashtray and dropping it twice. He blinked and moved toward me. His head looked like a frog's head. But he didn't hop, he stumbled toward me, stopped in front of me.

"Scotch and water," I told him.

"You want the water in the scotch?"

"I said, 'Scotch *and* water.'"

"Huh?"

"Scotch and water, separately, please."

The 3 kids were looking at me. The one in the middle spoke.

"Hey, old man, you want some pain?"

I just looked at him and smiled.

"We give free pain," the one in the middle said. They all sneered, they all kept sneering.

The bartender arrived with my scotch and water.

"I think I'll come down and drink your drink," the same one spoke again.

"You touch my drink and I'll break you in half like a piece of dry shit."

"Oh my my my," he said.

"Oh my," said the second.

"Oh my," said the third.

I drained the scotch and skipped the water.

"Old man thinks he's tough," said the one in the middle.

"Maybe we ought to see how tough he is," said another.

"Yes," said the last.

God, how boring they were. Like almost everybody else. Nothing new, nothing fresh any more. Dead, flat. Like the movies.

"Give me the same thing." I told the bartender.

"Was that a scotch and water?"

"It was."

"That old man don't look like much to me," said the one in the middle.

"Doesn't," I said.

"Doesn't what?"

"Old man *doesn't* look like much."

"Then you agree with us?"

"Correcting you. And I hope it's the last correction I have to make tonight."

The bartender arrived with my drink. Then, he left.

"Maybe we can correct your ass," said the one who had been doing most of the talking.

I ignored that one.

"Maybe we'll stick your head up your ass," said one of the others.

Boring damned people. All over the earth. Propagating more boring damned people. What a horror show. The earth swarmed with them.

"Maybe we'll make you suck a carrot," said one of them.

"Maybe he'd like to suck three carrots," said one of the others.

I didn't say anything. I drained my scotch, had a water, stood up, nodded to the back of the bar.

"Oh, look he wants to see us outside!"

"Maybe he wants our carrots!"

"Let's go see!"

I walked out toward the back. I heard them behind me. Then I heard the click of a switch blade opening. I turned in time to kick it out of his hand. Then I gave him a chop behind the ear. He dropped and I stepped over him. The other two turned and started running. They ran down through the bar and out the front entrance. I let them go. I walked back to the other kid. He was still out. I picked him up, carried him over my shoulder, took him outside. I stretched him out on a bus bench on his back. Then I took off his shoes and threw them down a storm drain. Ditto his wallet. Then I went back inside, went back and got the switch blade, pocketed it, went back to my stool, ordered another drink.

I heard the babe cough. She was lighting a cigarette.

"Mister," she said, "I liked that. I like real men."

I ignored that.

"I'm Trachea," she said.

She picked up her drink and came and sat down next to me. She had on too much perfume and a week's worth of lipstick.

"We could get to know each other," she said.

"It wouldn't pay off, it would only be stupid."

"What makes you say that?"

"Experience."

"Maybe you met all the wrong kinds of women?"

"Maybe I'm attached to that."

"I could be the right one."

"Sure."

"Buy me a drink."

Mine was arriving.

"A drink for Trachea," I told the barkeep.

"Gin and tonic, Bobby…"

Bobby toddled off.

"You haven't told me your name?" she lisped.

"David."

"Oh, I like that. I once knew a David."

"What happened to him?"

"I forget."

Trachea leaned her flank against me. She was about 25 pounds overweight.

"You're cute," she said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Ah, I dunno…" She paused. "You like me?"

"Well, not really."

"You should. I'm good."

"What at? You take shorthand?"

"No, but I make short things long."

"Like what?"

"You know!"

"No, I don't."

"Guess."

"Balloons?"

"You're funny."

"I've been told."

Her drink arrived. She took a sip.

The more I looked at her the less enamored I became.

"Damn it," she said, "my lighter!"

She opened her purse and began pulling things out. A beer bottle opener. Three shades of lipstick. Chewing gum. A whistle. And…what?

"I found it!" she said, holding up the lighter. She tapped out a cigarette, lit it.

"What's that thing there?"

"Where?"

"There. On the bar. That red thing."

I pointed.

"Oh," she said, "that's my sparrow."

"Is it alive? Was it alive? Ever?"

"No, silly, it's stuffed. I got it at a pet shop today. It's for my kitty. It's my catnip sparrow. Kitty loves them."

"Oh, hell, put it away."

"David, you got excited there for a minute! Do birds turn you on?"

"Just the Red Sparrow."

"You want it?"

"No, it's all right."

"I got some more catnip sparrows at my place. You can meet my kitty."

"No, it's all right, Trachea. I've got to get going."

"All right, David, but you don't know what you're missing."

I got up, walked down the bar, tossed some bills to the bartender and walked out. The punk was no longer on the bench. I got into my car, pulled out and headed into traffic. It was about ten p.m. The moon was up and my life was slowly going nowhere.

47

The next day I was sitting in the office. The door kicked open and there was Harry Sanderson and his two monkeys. This time Sanderson was dressed in a light purple suit. His taste in colors was freaky. I knew a babe like that once, she had a way of wearing those weird colors. Like we'd go out to a restaurant to eat and everybody would turn and look at her. Problem was, she wasn't much to look at. Even with a hangover and a 3-day beard I looked better than she did. Anyhow, back to Sanderson — "Punk," he said, "your 24 hours are up. You still diddling with your weenie or you made your mind up?"

"I'm still diddling with my weenie."

"You want the Red Sparrow or not?"

"I want it. But you guys remind me of these guys who worked over my aunt in Illinois."

"Your aunt? What the fuck's this about your aunt?"

"She had a leaky roof."

"That right?"

"Yeah. These guys came by and told her they'd fix her roof, they had a new super sealant. They had her sign a piece of paper, write out a check and then they climbed up there."

"Up where, punk?"

"The roof. They got up there and poured used motor oil all over. Then they split. Next time it rained, it all came through, the rain, the oil. Ruined everything in my aunt's house."

"No kiddin', Belane? You touch my goddamned heart with that one! Now, let's talk! You want the Sparrow or you want us to walk out of here?"

"You're gonna loan me 10 grand, huh? Which I ain't even going to get and you're going to charge me 15% a month interest? You got any other sweet deals for me? I mean, look at it this way: if you were me would you touch this goddamned deal?"

"Belane," Sanderson smiled, "one of the few things in the world that I am grateful for is that I am *not* you."

Both of his monkeys smiled at that one.

"You sleep with these guys, Sanderson?"

"Sleep? What the hell you mean, sleep?"

"Sleep. Close your eyes. Play hand up the cheek. Stuff like that."

"Belane, I ought to bust you up so you're less than a fart in an empty church!"

Both of his monkeys giggled at that one.

I inhaled, exhaled. Somehow, I felt as if I were going a bit mad. But I often felt that way.

"So, Sanderson, you say you can put the Sparrow in my hand?"

"Beyond a doubt."

"Well, screw you."

"What?"

"I said, 'screw you!'"

"What's the matter with you, Belane? Going a bit mad?"

"Yeah. Yeah. That's it."

"Just a moment…"

Sanderson gathered his two monkeys close to him. I could hear them buzzing and chirping. Then the huddle broke.

Sanderson looked solemn.

"It's your last shot, punk."

"What? What is?"

"We've decided to let you have the bird for 5 grand."

"3 grand."

"4 grand is our final offer."

"Where's the fucking papers?"

"I got 'em here…"

He reached into his coat and threw them on the desk. I tried to read them. There was much legal jargon. I was to sign for a loan from the Acme Executioners. 15% interest a month. I could make that out. Also, something else.

"This thing still reads as a 10 grand loan."

"Oh, Mr. Belane, we can fix that," said Sanderson. He snatched the papers, crossed out the 10, changed it to 4, initialed it. He flipped the papers back on my desk.

"Now, sign…"

I found a pen. Then I did it. I signed the goddamned thing.

Sanderson snatched the papers up and put them back in his coat.

"Thanks a bunch, Mr. Belane. Have a nice day."

He and his two monkeys turned to leave.

"Hey, where's the Red Sparrow?"

Sanderson stopped, turned.

"Oh," he said.

"Yeah, oh," I said.

"Meet us at the Grand Central Market, tomorrow afternoon, 2 p.m."

"That's a big place. Where?"

"Just find the butcher shop. Stand by the hogs' heads. We'll find you."

"Hogs' heads?"

"Right. We'll find you."

Then they turned and walked out of there. I sat there looking at the walls. I had a vague feeling that I had been screwed.

48

So, it was 2 p.m. I was at the Grand Central Market. I had found the butcher shop and I stood at the hogs' heads. The holes in the skulls, where the eyes had been, looked at me. I looked back, took a puff at my cigar. So many things to make a man sad. The poor boiled those skulls for soup.

I wondered if I had been set up. These guys might never show.

A poor soul walked toward me. He was dressed in rags. As he got close I spoke to him, "Hey, buddy, you got a dollar for a beer? My damned tongue is hanging out…"

The miserable bastard turned and walked off. Sometimes I gave, sometimes I didn't. It all depended upon how my feet hit the floor in the morning. Maybe. Who knew?

Well, there wasn't enough money to go around. There never had been. I didn't know what to do about it.

Then I saw them. Sanderson and his two monkeys. They were approaching me. Sanderson was smiling and carrying something covered by a cloth. It looked like a bird cage under there. Was it a bird cage?

Then they stood in front of me. Sanderson looked over at the hogs' heads.

"Belane, just be glad you're not a hog's head."

"Why?"

"Why? A hog's head can't fuck, eat candy, watch tv."

"What you got under the rag, Sanderson?"

"Something for you, baby, you're going to like it."

"Sure," said one of the monkeys.

"Yep," said the other.

“These guys ever disagree with you, Sanderson?”

“Uh-uh, that would be death.”

“We wanna live,” said one of them.

“To a ripe old age,” said the other.

“Like I said, Sanderson, what you got in the cage?”

“Oh, this ain’t your cage, this cage is empty.”

“You gonna give me an empty cage?”

“This is the decoy, Belane.”

“What do you need a decoy for?”

“We just like to play. We’re playful.”

“Great. Now, where’s the real cage?”

“In the front seat of your car.”

“My car? How did you…”

“Oh, we’re good at that, Belane.”

“But why did you say I was going to like it?”

“Like what?”

“That cage you’re holding there. You said I was going to like it and your two doormats agreed.”

“Just playing. We like to play. It was small talk.”

“Small talk? When you going to stop playing? When is the talk going to get large?”

“The front seat of your car, Belane. Check it out. We’re going now. See you around town. In 30 days.”

They walked off. And I was left with the hogs’ heads.

Well. I got out of there and walked toward parking. As I walked along I saw a wino leaning against a wall, his head down. The flies were having at him. I stopped and stuck a dollar in his pocket.

Then I was into parking. I walked toward the car, got in. There was another bird cage there, covered. I made sure all the windows were shut. Then I took a deep breath and pulled the cloth away. There was a bird in there. A red one. I looked close. It wasn’t a sparrow. It was a canary dyed red. Umm umm. Ow. Oh.

They could have gotten a sparrow and dyed it red. No, they had to get a fucking canary. And I couldn’t turn it loose. It would starve out there. I had to keep it. I was stuck.

And taken.

I started the car and drove out of there. I hustled the signals and finally got on the freeway. As I drove along I heard a little sound. The cage door had popped open and the bird had gotten out. It began to fly wildly about the car. The red canary. A guy in the other lane saw the action and began laughing at me. I gave him the finger. A huge dark scowl crossed his face. I saw him reach. He rolled down his window and pointed the gun at me, fired. He was a lousy shot. He missed. But I felt the wind from the bullet passing by my nose. The bird flew wildly and I gunned the car. There was a bullet hole in each of my windows, one made going in, the other out. I didn't look back. I had it to the floor. I kept it there until I got to my exit. Then I looked back. My friend was nowhere in sight. I felt the bird then. He was standing on the top of my head. I could feel him there. Then he let go. I could feel the bird droppings as they dropped.

Not a very good day.

Not a hell of a very good day for me.

49

I was in the office. I think it was a Wednesday. There were no new cases. I was still on the Red Sparrow caper, mulling it over, sorting out my moves. The only move I could think of was moving out of town before 25 days were up.

No way. They weren't going to run my ass out of Hollywood. I *was* Hollywood, what was left of it.

There was a very polite knock on the door.

"Yeah," I said, "drag it in."

The door opened and here was this little fellow, dressed all in black, black shoes, black suit, even a black shirt. Only his necktie was green. Lime green. His gorilla loomed up behind him. Only a gorilla had more brains.

"I'm Johnny Temple," he said, "and this is my assistant, Luke."

"Luke, eh? Tell me, what does he do?"

"Whatever I tell him."

"Why don't you tell him to leave?"

"What's the matter, Belane, don't you like Luke?"

"Do I have to?

Luke took a step forward. His face began to contort, he looked as if he were going to cry.

"You not like me, Belane?" Luke asked.

"Luke, you stay out of this," said Temple.

"Yeah, stay out of this," I said.

"You like me, Johnny?" Luke asked.

"Of course, of course! Now, Luke, you go stand in front of the door and don't let anybody in or out."

"You too?"

“What do you mean, Luke?”

“I not let you in or out either?”

“No, Luke, you let me in and out. But nobody else. Not until I tell you to.”

“O.k.”

Luke walked over and stood in front of the door.

Temple pulled up a chair, sat down.

“I’m here from Acme Executioners. I’m here to brief you. Our salesman, Harold Sanderson…”

“Salesman? You call that guy a salesman?”

“One of our best.”

“I guess he is,” I admitted, “look at that!”

I pointed to the bird cage hanging in the corner. Inside was the red canary.

“He sold me that,” I said.

“Harry could sell the skin off a dead body,” said Temple.

“He probably has,” I said.

“That’s neither here nor there. We are here to brief you.”

“Go ahead but make it brief.”

“You’re not funny, Belane. We loaned you 4 grand at 15% interest a month. That will be $600. We want to make sure you understand everything before we come to collect.”

“Suppose I don’t have it?”

“We always collect, Mr. Belane, in one way or the other.”

“You break legs, Temple?”

“Our methods vary.”

“Suppose those methods fail. Would you have a man killed for 4 grand and interest?”

Temple pulled out a pack of smokes, tapped one out, lit it with his lighter. Then he slowly inhaled, exhaled.

“You bore me, Belane.”

Then he said, “Luke…”

“Yes, Johnny?”

“See that red bird in the cage?”

“Yes, Johnny.”

"Luke, I want you to walk over there, take that bird out of that cage and I want you to eat it alive."

"Yes, Johnny."

Luke started to walk over to the cage.

"JESUS, TEMPLE, STOP HIM! STOP HIM! STOP HIM!" I yelled.

"Luke," said Temple, "I've changed my mind, I don't want you to eat that bird alive."

"Should I roast him first, Johnny?"

"No, no, just leave him alone. Go back and stand by the door."

"Yes, Johnny."

Temple looked at me.

"You see, Belane, we always have to collect one way or the other. And if one method doesn't work we move to another. We have to stay in business. We are known all over town. Our reputation is acknowledged everywhere. We can allow nothing or no one to besmirch that reputation. I want you to understand this thoroughly."

"I think I get it, Temple."

"Fine. Your first due date comes up in 25 days. You have been briefed."

Temple stood up, smiled.

"Good day," he said.

He turned.

"All right, Luke, open the door, we are leaving."

Luke did that. Temple turned and gave me a last look. He was no longer smiling. Then they were gone.

I walked over to the cage and looked at my red canary. Some of the dye was wearing off, some of the natural yellow was beginning to show through. It was a nice bird. It looked at me and I looked back. Then it made a little bird sound: "cheep!" and somehow that made me feel good. I was easy to please. It was the rest of the world that was the problem.

50

I decided to go to my apartment and have a few drinks. I had to think it through. I was at a dead end with the Red Sparrow and with my life. I drove on over, parked it, got out. I had to get out of that apartment. I'd been there 5 years. It was like I was building a nest, only nothing was hatching. Too many people knew where I lived. I walked up to my door, unlocked it. I pushed it open, there was something in the way. A body. A babe stretched there. No, hell, it was one of those inflatable dolls, one of those inflatable things some guys made love to. Not me, though, buddy.

The babe was fully inflated. I picked her up and carried her to the couch. Then I noticed a sign around her throat: "Belane, lay off the Red Sparrow or you'll be less than this dead rubber fuck."

Nice note. So, I'd had a visitor. Somebody who didn't want me on the case. But it gave me hope. The Red Sparrow must truly exist or people wouldn't be acting like this. All I had to do was pick up the trail. There had to be one. There were too many scratchings going on. I could be on something big. Maybe international. Maybe something from another world? The Red Sparrow. Son of a bitch, matters were getting interesting. I made myself a nice drink, had a hit. Then the phone rang. I picked it up.

"Yeah?"

"Pooper, what are you doing?"

A chill ran up my back. It was one of my x-wives, Penny. Last I knew, 5 years or so ago, after our divorce, she had vanished off into somewhere with a guy who worked the tables at Vegas, a Sammy.

"Sorry, you have the wrong number, madam."

"I know your voice, Pooper. How ya doin'?"

She had this nickname for me. Totally groundless.

"Doin' lousy," I said.

"You need company."

"Uh-uh."

"You never knew what you needed, Pooper."

"Maybe not but I know what I don't need."

"I'm comin' up."

"Uh-uh."

"I'm downstairs, I'm phoning from the hall phone."

"Where's Sammy?"

"Who?"

"Sammy."

"Oh, that…Listen, I'm comin' up."

Penny hung up. I felt awful, as if somebody had smeared shit all over me. I drained my drink and made another. Then there was the knock. I opened the door. There was Penny, 5 years older and 30 pounds heavier. She smiled an awful smile.

"Glad to see me?" she asked.

"Come on in," I said. She followed me into the other room.

"Fix me a drink, Pooper!"

"Yeah…"

"Hey, what's that?"

"What?"

"That rubber thing. That rubber woman."

"That's an inflatable doll."

"You use it?"

"Not yet."

"What's it doing here?"

"I don't know. Here's your drink."

Penny pushed the doll to the floor and sat down with her drink. She took a hit.

"I've missed you, Pooper."

"Missed what?"

"Oh, little things."

"Like what?"

"Can't think of them now."

She gulped her drink, looked over at me, smiled.

"I need some money, Pooper. Sammy skipped out with everything I had."

"I'm in hock, Penny. Some guy's going to bust my sack if I don't pay the interest on a loan."

I walked out and poured two more drinks, came back.

"Just a little money, Pooper."

"I don't have it, for Christ's sake."

"I'll give you some head. Remember, I used to give good head?"

"Look, all I've got is $20. Here…"

I dug it out and handed it to her.

"Thanks…"

Penny stuck it into her purse. We sat there, sipping at the drinks.

"We had some good times together," she said.

"Early," I said.

"I don't know," she said, "I started getting depressed."

"Listen, we divorced because we couldn't make it."

"Yeah," she said. "You don't fuck that thing, do you?"

"No, somebody left it here."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Somebody's playing games with me."

"You want some head?"

"No."

"Can I stay here and drink a while?"

"How long?"

"A couple of hours."

"All right."

"Thanks, Pooper."

When she left she was pretty drunk. I gave her another $20 for a cab. She said it wasn't far.

After she left I just sat there. Then I picked up the inflatable doll and sat it on the couch next to me. I had a vodka and tonic. It was a quiet evening. A quiet evening in hell. As the earth burned like a rotten log full of termites.

51

You have no idea how fast 25 days can go when you don’t want them to go.

I was sitting in my office when the door pushed open. It was Johnny Temple. He had two new apes with him.

“Acme Executioners,” he said, “we’ve come to collect.”

“I don’t have it, Johnny.”

“You don’t have the 600 bucks?”

“I don’t have 60 bucks.”

Johnny sighed. “We’re gonna have to make an example of you.”

“Like what? You gonna rough me up for a lousy 600 bucks?”

“Not rough you up, Belane, but take you out. All the way.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Don’t matter what you believe,” said one of the apes.

“Yeah, don’t matter,” said the other ape.

“Now wait a minute, Johnny. You say you’re gonna take me out for 600 bucks on a 4 grand loan? A loan I was suckered into and never saw? And you never delivered the Red Sparrow. How about the guys who owe you *big money*? Why don’t you take them out? Why me?”

“Well, Belane, it’s like this. We take you out for owing a pittance. The word gets out around town. And it really puts the *fear* into those who owe us big! Because they figure if we can do this to you over almost nothing, then they are going to know what the hell is going to happen to them. Get it?”

“Yeah,” I said, “I get it. But we’re talking about my life here, you know. It’s like it doesn’t matter, you know.”

“It doesn’t,” said Johnny. “We’re running a business. Business has never been concerned with anything but profit.”

“I can’t believe that this is happening,” I said, sliding the desk drawer open.

“Hold it!” said one of the apes, stepping forward and poking a luger in my ear. “I’ll take that piece!”

He slid my.32 out of there.

“You move fast for a fat fuck,” I told him.

“Yeah,” he smiled.

“All right, Belane,” said Johnny Temple, “we’re all going for a little ride.”

“But it’s broad daylight!”

“All the better to see you with. Come on, get up!”

I got up from behind the desk and the two apes squeezed me between them. Temple walked behind us. We left the office and walked down to the elevator. I reached out and pressed the button myself.

“Thanks, punk,” said Johnny.

It came up. The doors opened. Empty. They shoved me on. Down we went. Empty feeling. First floor. Lobby. We walked out on the street. It was crowded. People walking everywhere. I thought, I’ll scream out, hey, these guys are going to kill me! But I was afraid if I did that, they’d do it then. I walked along with them. It was a beautiful day. Then we were at their car. The two apes got in the back with me in the middle. Johnny Temple took the wheel up front. He pulled out into traffic.

“This whole thing is a bad senseless dream,” I said.

“It ain’t no dream, Belane,” said Johnny Temple.

“Where you takin’ me?”

“Griffith Park, Belane, we’re going to have a little picnic. A little picnic on one of those isolated trails. Secluded. Private.”

“How can you fucking guys be so cold?” I asked.

“It’s easy,” said Johnny, “we were born that way.”

“Yeah,” laughed one of the apes.

We drove along. I still couldn’t believe it was happening. Maybe it wouldn’t happen. Maybe at the last moment they’d tell me it was all a joke. Just trying to teach me a lesson. Something like that.

Then we were there. Johnny parked the car.

"All right. Get him out boys. We're going for a little walk."

One of the apes yanked me out of the side of the car. Then each ape had me by an arm. Johnny walked along behind us. Then we were on a discarded horse path. It was covered with brush and tree branches and the sun was blocked off.

"Listen you guys," I said. "This is enough. Tell me this whole thing is a joke and we'll all go have a drink somewhere."

"It's no joke, Belane, we're taking you out. All the way," said Johnny.

"600 dollars. I can't believe it. I can't believe the world works this way."

"It does. We gave you our reasoning. Keep walking," said Johnny.

We kept walking. Then Johnny said, "This looks like a good spot. Turn around, Belane."

I did. I saw the gun. Johnny fired. Four shots. Right in the gut. I fell on my face but managed to roll on my back.

"Thanks a bunch, Temple," I managed to say.

They walked off.

I don't know. I must have passed out. Then I was back. I knew I didn't have long. I was losing blood, lots of it.

Then I seemed to be hearing music, music like I'd never heard before. And then it happened. Something was taking shape, appearing before me. It was red, red, and like the music, a red I had never seen before. And there it was: THE RED SPARROW.

Gigantic, glowing, beautiful. Never a sparrow so large, so real, never one so magnificent.

It stood before me. And then—there was Lady Death. Standing beside the Sparrow. And never had *she* looked so beautiful.

"Belane," she said, "you really got suckered into a bad play."

"I can't talk much, Lady…Fill me in on the whole matter."

"Your John Barton is a very perceptive man. He sensed that the Red Sparrow existed, was real, somehow, somewhere. And that you would find it. Now you have. Most of the others—Deja Fountain, Sanderson, Johnny Temple—were con artists, trying to trick and bleed you. Since you and Musso's are the last remnants of the old Hollywood, the real Hollywood, they got the idea you had big money."

I smiled.

"Lady, how about that inflated doll in my room?"

"That? That was the mailman. He'd heard you were on the Red Sparrow caper and he wanted to pay you back one more time for the beating. He jimmied your door and left the thing there."

"Now what, Lady?"

"I'm leaving you with the Red Sparrow. You're in good hands. Goodbye, Belane, it's been fun."

"Yeah…"

And there I was with that gigantic glowing bird. It stood there.

This can't be true, I thought. This isn't the way it is supposed to happen. No, this isn't the way it is supposed to happen.

Then, as I watched, the Sparrow slowly opened its beak. A huge void appeared. And within the beak was a vast yellow vortex, more dynamic than the sun, unbelievable.

This isn't the way it happens, I thought again.

The beak opened wide, the Sparrow's head moved closer and the blaze and the blare of yellow swept over and enveloped me.

About the Author

CHARLES BUKOWSKI is one of America's best-known contemporary writers of poetry and prose, and, many would claim, its most influential and imitated poet. He was born in Andernach, Germany, to an American soldier father and a German mother in 1920, and brought to the United States at the age of three. He was raised in Los Angeles and lived there for fifty years. He published his first story in 1944 when he was twenty-four and began writing poetry at the age of thirty-five. He died in San Pedro, California, on March 9, 1994, at the age of seventy-three, shortly after completing his last novel, *Pulp* (1994).

During his lifetime he published more than forty-five books of poetry and prose, including the novels *Post Office* (1971), *Factotum* (1975), *Women* (1978), *Ham on Rye* (1982), and *Hollywood* (1989). Among his most recent books are the posthumous editions of *What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire* (1999), *Open All Night: New Poems* (2000), *Beerspit Night and Cursing: The Correspondence of Charles Bukowski and Sheri Martinelli, 1960-1967* (2001), and *The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps: New Poems* (2001).

All of his books have now been published in translation in over a dozen languages and his worldwide popularity remains undiminished. In the years to come, Ecco will publish additional volumes of previously uncollected poetry and letters.

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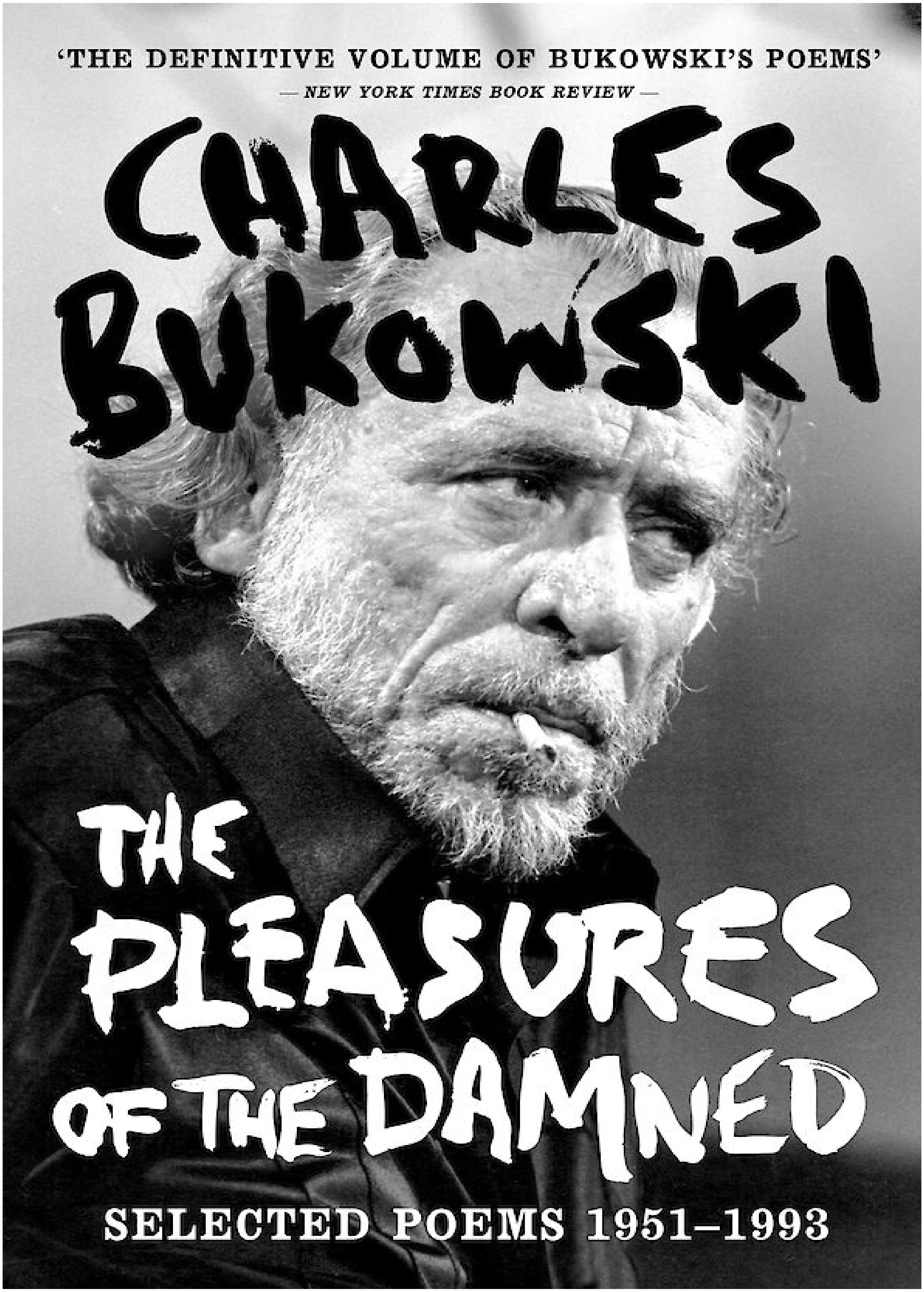


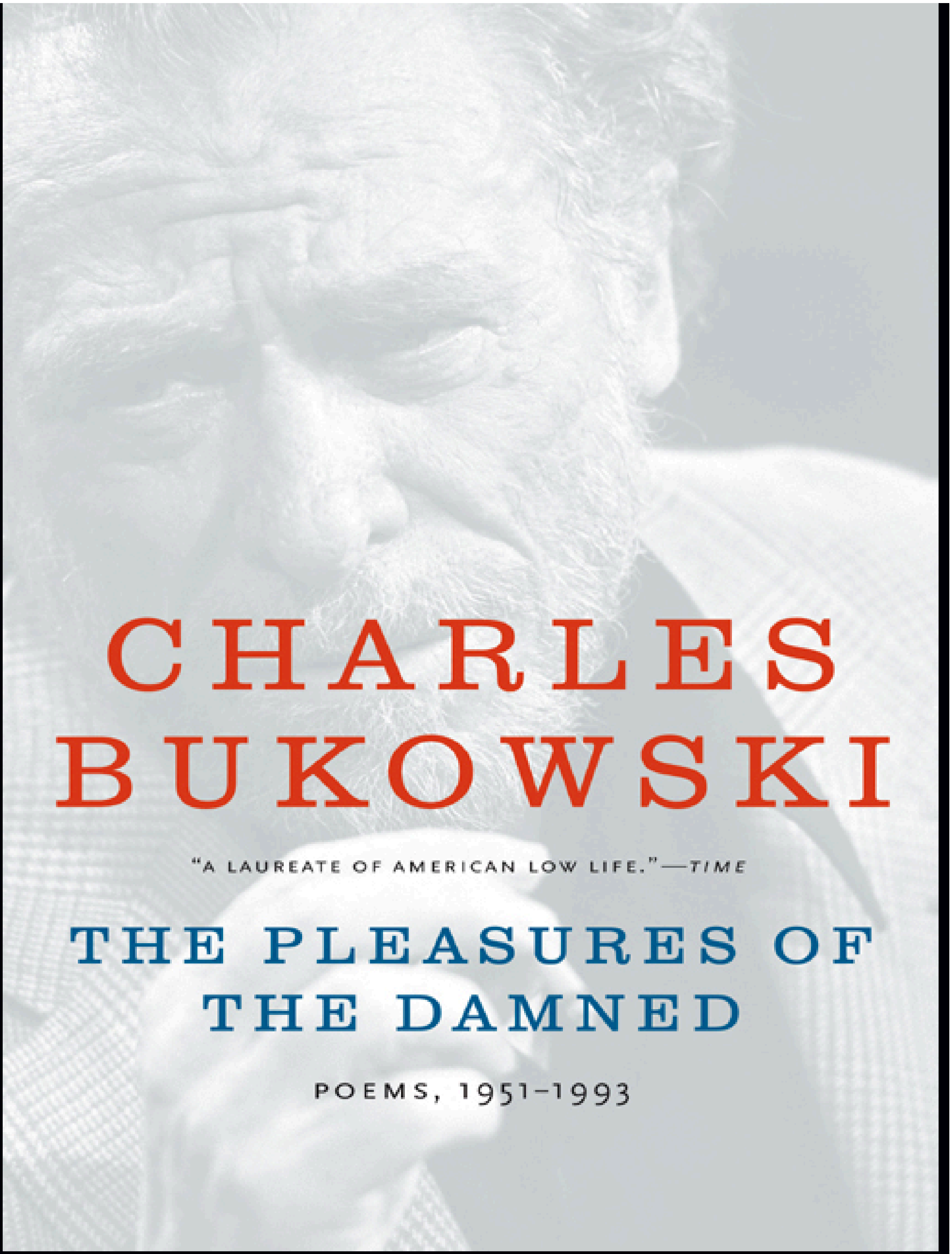
'THE DEFINITIVE VOLUME OF BUKOWSKI'S POEMS'

— *NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW* —

CHARLES BUKOWSKI

THE PLEASURES OF THE DAMNED

SELECTED POEMS 1951–1993

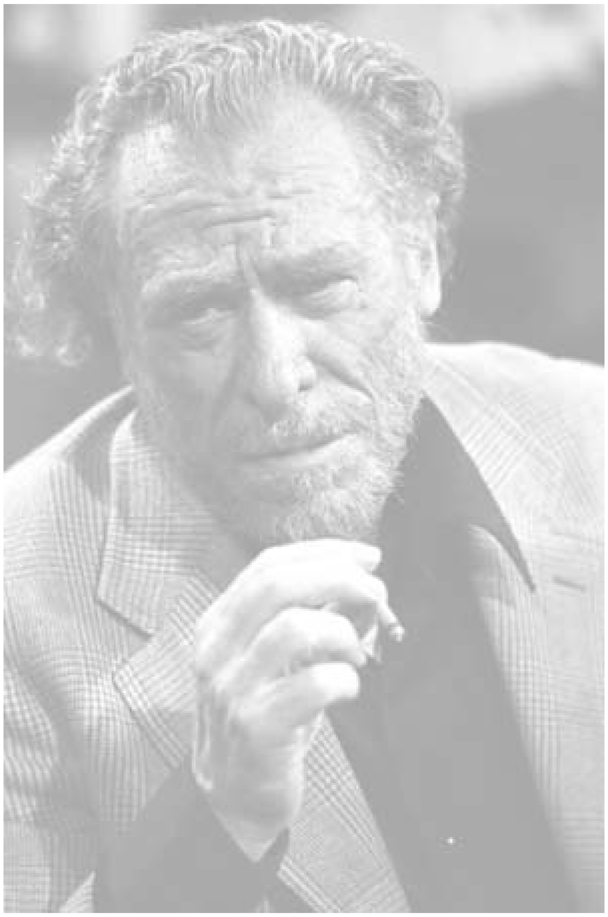


CHARLES BUKOWSKI

"A LAUREATE OF AMERICAN LOW LIFE."—*TIME*

THE PLEASURES OF THE DAMNED

POEMS, 1951–1993



The Pleasures of the Damned
Poems, 1951–1993

Charles Bukowski

Edited by John Martin

HarperCollins e-books

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the mockingbird

the mockingbird had been following the cat all summer mocking mocking mocking teasing and cocksure; the cat crawled under rockers on porches tail flashing and said something angry to the mockingbird which I didn’t understand.

yesterday the cat walked calmly up the driveway with the mockingbird alive in its mouth, wings fanned, beautiful wings fanned and flopping, feathers parted like a woman’s legs, and the bird was no longer mocking, it was asking, it was praying but the cat striding down through centuries would not listen.

I saw it crawl under a yellow car with the bird to bargain it to another place.

summer was over.

something’s knocking at the door

a great white light dawns across the continent as we fawn over our failed traditions, often kill to preserve them or sometimes kill just to kill.
it doesn’t seem to matter: the answers dangle just out of reach, out of hand, out of mind.
the leaders of the past were insufficient, the leaders of the present are unprepared.
we curl up tightly in our beds at night and wait.
it is a waiting without hope, more like a prayer for unmerited grace.
it all looks more and more like the same old movie.
the actors are different but the plot’s the same: senseless.
we should have known, watching our fathers.
we should have known, watching our mothers.
they did not know, they too were not prepared to teach.
we were too naive to ignore their counsel and now we have embraced their ignorance as our own.
we are them, multiplied.
we are their unpaid debts.
we are bankrupt
in money and
in spirit.
there are a few exceptions, of course, but these teeter on the edge and will
at any moment
tumble down to join the rest of us, the raving, the battered, the blind and the sadly corrupt.
a great white light dawns across the continent, the flowers open blindly in the stinking wind, as grotesque and ultimately unlivable our 21st century
struggles to beborn.

his wife, the painter

There are sketches on the walls of men and women and ducks, and outside a large green bus swerves through traffic like insanity sprung from a waving line; Turgenev, Turgenev, says the radio, and Jane Austen, Jane Austen, too.

“I am going to do her portrait on the 28th, while you are at work.”

He is just this edge of fat and he walks constantly, he fritters; they have him; they are eating him hollow like a webbed fly, and his eyes are red-suckled with anger-fear.

He feels the hatred and discard of the world, sharper than his razor, and his gut-feel hangs like a wet polyp; and he self-decisions himself defeated trying to shake his hung beard from razor in water (like life), not warm enough.

Daumier. Rue Transnonain, le 15 Avril, 1843. (Lithograph.) Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale.

“She has a face unlike that of any woman I have ever known.”

“What is it? A love affair?”

“Silly. I can’t love a woman. Besides, she’s pregnant.”

I can paint—a flower eaten by a snake; that sunlight is a lie; and that markets smell of shoes and naked boys clothed, and under everything some river, some beat, some twist that clambers along the edge of my temple and bites nip-dizzy…

men drive cars and paint their houses,
but they are mad; men sit in barber chairs; buy hats.

Corot. Recollection of Mortefontaine.
Paris, Louvre

“I must write Kaiser, though I think he’s a homosexual.”

“Are you still reading Freud?”

“Page 299.”

She made a little hat and he fastened two snaps under one arm, reaching up from the bed like a long feeler from the snail, and she went to church, and he thought now I h’ve time and the dog.

About church: the trouble with a mask is it never changes.

So rude the flowers that grow and do not grow beautiful.

So magic the chair on the patio that does not hold legs and belly and arm and neck and mouth that bites into the wind like the end of a tunnel.

He turned in bed and thought: I am searching for some segment in the air. It floats about the people's heads.

When it rains on the trees it sits between the branches warmer and more blood-real than the dove.

Orozco. Christ Destroying the Cross.

Hanover, Dartmouth College, Baker Library.

He burned away in sleep.

on the sidewalk and in the sun

I have seen an old man around town recently carrying an enormous pack.
he uses a walking stick
and moves up and down the streets with this pack strapped to his back.
I keep seeing him.
if he'd only throw that pack away, I think, he'd have a chance, not much of a chance but a chance.
and he's in a tough district—east Hollywood.
they aren't going to give him a dry bone in east Hollywood.
he is lost. with that pack.
on the sidewalk and in the sun.
god almighty, old man, I think, throw away that pack.
then I drive on, thinking of my own problems.
the last time I saw him he was not walking.
it was ten thirty a.m. on north Bronson and hot, very hot, and he sat on a little ledge, bent, the pack still strapped to his back.
I slowed down to look at his face.
I had seen one or two other men in my life with looks on their faces like that.
I speeded up and turned on the radio.
I knew that look.
I would never see him again.

the elephants of Vietnam

first they used to, he told me, gun and bomb the elephants, you could hear their screams over all the other sounds; but you flew high to bomb the people, you never saw it, just a little flash from way up but with the elephants you could watch it happen and hear how they screamed; I'd tell my buddies, listen, you guys stop that, but they just laughed as the elephants scattered throwing up their trunks (if they weren't blown off) opening their mouths wide and kicking their dumb clumsy legs as blood ran out of big holes in their bellies.

then we'd fly back, mission completed.

we'd get everything: convoys, dumps, bridges, people, elephants and all the rest.

he told me later, I felt bad about the elephants.

dark night poem

they say that
nothing is wasted:
either that
or
it all is.
(uncollected)

the last days of the suicide kid

I can see myself now
after all these suicide days and nights, being wheeled out of one of those sterile rest homes (of course, this is only if I get famous and lucky) by a subnormal and bored nurse…
there I am sitting upright in my wheelchair…
almost blind, eyes rolling backward into the dark part of my skull looking for the mercy of death…
“Isn’t it a lovely day, Mr. Bukowski?”
“O, yeah, yeah…”
the children walk past and I don’t even exist and lovely women walk by with big hot hips and warm buttocks and tight hot everything praying to be loved and I don’t even
exist…
“It’s the first sunlight we’ve had in 3 days, Mr. Bukowski.”
“Oh, yeah, yeah.”
there I am sitting upright in my wheelchair, myself whiter than this sheet of paper, bloodless, brain gone, gamble gone, me, Bukowski, gone…
“Isn’t it a lovely day, Mr. Bukowski?”
“O, yeah, yeah…” pissing in my pajamas, slop drooling out of my mouth.
2 young schoolboys run by—
“Hey, did you see that old guy?”
“Christ, yes, he made me sick!”
after all the threats to do so somebody else has committed suicide for me at last.
the nurse stops the wheelchair, breaks a rose from a nearby bush, puts it in my hand.
I don’t even know
what it is. it might as well be my pecker for all the good it does.

tabby cat

he has on blue jeans and tennis shoes and walks with two young girls about his age.
every now and then he leaps into the air and clicks his heels together.
he's like a young colt but somehow he also reminds me more of a tabby cat.
his ass is soft and he has no more on his mind than a gnat.
he jumps along behind his girls clicking his heels together.
then he pulls the hair of one runs over to the other and squeezes her neck.
he has fucked both of them and is pleased with himself.
it has all happened so easily for him.
and I think, ah,
my little tabby cat what nights and days wait for you.
your soft ass
will be your doom.
your agony
will be endless
and the girls
who are yours now will soon belong to other men who didn't get their cookies and cream so easily and so early.
the girls are practicing on you the girls are practicing for other men for someone out of the jungle for someone out of the lion cage.
I smile as
I watch you walking along clicking your heels together.
my god, boy, I fear for you on that night when you first find out.
it's a sunny day now.
jump
while you
can.

metamorphosis

a girlfriend came in built me a bed scrubbed and waxed the kitchen floor scrubbed the walls vacuumed cleaned the toilet the bathtub scrubbed the bathroom floor and cut my toenails and my hair.
then
all on the same day the plumber came and fixed the kitchen faucet and the toilet and the gas man fixed the heater and the phone man fixed the phone.
now I sit here in all this perfection.
it is quiet.
I have broken off with all 3 of my girlfriends.
I felt better when everything was in disorder.
it will take me some months to get back to normal: I can't even find a roach to commune with.
I have lost my rhythm.
I can't sleep.
I can't eat.
I have been robbed of my filth.

a poem is a city

a poem is a city filled with streets and sewers filled with saints, heroes, beggars, madmen, filled with banality and booze, filled with rain and thunder and periods of drought, a poem is a city at war, a poem is a city asking a clock why, a poem is a city burning, a poem is a city under guns its barbershops filled with cynical drunks, a poem is a city where God rides naked through the streets like Lady Godiva, where dogs bark at night, and chase away the flag; a poem is a city of poets, most of them quite similar and envious and bitter…

a poem is this city now, 50 miles from nowhere,

9:09 in the morning,

the taste of liquor and cigarettes, no police, no lovers, walking the streets, this poem, this city, closing its doors, barricaded, almost empty, mournful without tears, aging without pity, the hardrock mountains, the ocean like a lavender flame, a moon destitute of greatness, a small music from broken windows…

a poem is a city, a poem is a nation, a poem is the world…

and now I stick this under glass for the mad editor’s scrutiny, and night is elsewhere and faint gray ladies stand in line, dog follows dog to estuary, the trumpets bring on gallows as small men rant at things they cannot do.

a smile to remember

we had goldfish and they circled around and around in the bowl on the table near the heavy drapes covering the picture window and my mother, always smiling, wanting us all to be happy, told me, “be happy, Henry!”

and she was right: it’s better to be happy if you can but my father continued to beat her and me several times a week while raging inside his 6-foot-2 frame because he couldn’t understand what was attacking him from within.

my mother, poor fish,

wanting to be happy, beaten two or three times a week, telling me to be happy: “Henry, *smile!*

why don’t you ever *smile?”*

and then she would smile, to show me how, and it was the saddest smile I ever saw.

one day the goldfish died, all five of them, they floated on the water, on their sides, their eyes still open, and when my father got home he threw them to the cat there on the kitchen floor and we watched as my mother smiled.

a free 25-page booklet

dying for a beer dying for and of life

on a windy afternoon in Hollywood listening to symphony music from my little red radio on the floor.

a friend said,

“all ya gotta do is go out on the sidewalk and lay down somebody will pick you up somebody will take care of you.”

I look out the window at the sidewalk I see something walking on the sidewalk she wouldn’t lay down there, only in special places for special people with special $$$$

and

special ways

while I am dying for a beer on a windy afternoon in Hollywood, nothing like a beautiful broad dragging it past you on the sidewalk moving it past your famished window she’s dressed in the finest cloth she doesn’t care what you say how you look what you do as long as you do not get in her way, and it must be that she doesn’t shit or have blood she must be a cloud, friend, the way she floats past us.

I am too sick to lay down the sidewalks frighten me the whole damned city frightens me, what I will become what I have become frightens me.

ah, the bravado is gone the big run through center is gone on a windy afternoon in Hollywood my radio cracks and spits its dirty music through a floor full of empty beerbottles.

now I hear a siren it comes closer

the music stops

the man on the radio says, “we will send you a free 25-page booklet: FACE THE FACTS ABOUT COLLEGE COSTS.”

the siren fades into the cardboard mountains and I look out the window again as the clasped fist of boiling cloud comes down— the wind shakes the plants outside I wait for evening I wait for night I wait sitting in a chair by the window— the cook drops in the live

red-pink salty
rough-tit crab and the game works
on
come get me.

they, all of them, know

ask the sidewalk painters of Paris ask the sunlight on a sleeping dog ask the 3 pigs ask the paperboy
ask the music of Donizetti ask the barber
ask the murderer
ask the man leaning against a wall ask the preacher ask the maker of cabinets ask the pickpocket or the pawnbroker or the glass blower or the seller of manure or the dentist ask the revolutionist ask the man who sticks his head in the mouth of a lion ask the man who will release the next atom bomb ask the man who thinks he's Christ ask the bluebird who comes home at night ask the peeping Tom
ask the man dying of cancer ask the man who needs a bath ask the man with one leg ask the blind ask the man with the lisp ask the opium eater
ask the trembling surgeon ask the leaves you walk upon
ask a rapist or a
streetcar conductor or an old man pulling weeds in his garden ask a bloodsucker ask a trainer of fleas ask a man who eats fire ask the most miserable man you can find in his most miserable moment
ask a teacher of judo ask a rider of elephants ask a leper, a lifer, a lunger ask a professor of history ask the man who never cleans his fingernails ask a clown or ask the first face you see in the light of day ask your father
ask your son and
his son to be
ask me
ask a burned-out bulb in a paper sack ask the tempted, the damned, the foolish the wise, the slavering ask the builders of temples ask the men who have never worn shoes ask Jesus ask the moon
ask the shadows in the closet ask the moth, the monk, the madman ask the man who draws cartoons for *The New Yorker*

ask a goldfish

ask a fern shaking to a tapdance ask the map of India ask a kind face ask the man hiding under your bed ask the man you hate the most in this world ask the man who drank with Dylan Thomas ask the man who laced Jack Sharkey's gloves ask the sad-faced man drinking coffee ask the plumber ask the man who dreams of ostriches every night ask the ticket taker at a freak show ask the counterfeiter ask the man sleeping in an alley under a sheet of paper ask the conquerors of nations and planets ask the man who has just cut off his finger ask a bookmark in the bible ask the water dripping from a faucet while the phone rings ask perjury

ask the deep blue paint ask the parachute jumper ask the man with the bellyache ask the divine eye so sleek and swimming ask the boy wearing tight pants in the expensive academy ask the man who slipped in the bathtub ask the man chewed by the shark

ask the one who sold me the unmatched gloves

ask these and all those I have left out ask the fire the fire the fire— ask even the liars ask anybody you please at any time you please on any day you please whether it's raining or whether the snow is there or whether you are stepping out onto a porch yellow with warm heat ask this ask that ask the man with birdshit in his hair ask the torturer of animals ask the man who has seen many bullfights in Spain ask the owners of new Cadillacs ask the famous ask the timid

ask the albino

and the statesman

ask the landlords and the poolplayers ask the phonies ask the hired killers ask the bald men and the fat men and the tall men and the short men ask the one-eyed men, the oversexed and undersexed men ask the men who read all the newspaper editorials ask the men who breed roses

ask the men who feel almost no pain ask the dying ask the mowers of lawns and the attenders of football games ask any of these or all of these ask ask ask and they'll all tell you:

a snarling wife on the balustrade is more than a man can bear.

a future congressman

in the men’s room at the track this boy of about 7 or 8 years old came out of a stall and the man waiting for him (probably his father) asked, “what did you do with the racing program?
I gave it to you to keep.”
“no,” said the boy, “I ain’t seen it! I don’t have it!”
they walked off and I went into the stall because it was the only one available and there
in the toilet was the
program.
I tried to flush the program away but it just swam sluggishly about and remained.
I got out of there and found another empty stall.
that boy was ready for his life to come, he would undoubtedly be highly successful, the lying little prick.

eulogy

with old cars, especially when you buy them secondhand and drive them for many years a love affair is inevitable: you even learn to accept their little eccentricities: the leaking water pump the failing plugs the rusted throttle arm the reluctant carburetor the oily engine the dead clock the frozen speedometer and other sundry defects.
you also learn all the tricks to keep the love affair alive: how to slam the glove compartment so that it will stay closed, how to slap the headlight with an open palm in order to have light, how many times to pump the gas pedal and how long to wait before touching the starter, and you overlook each burn hole in the upholstery and each spring poking through the fabric.
your car has been in and out of police impounds, has been ticketed for various
malfunctions: broken wipers, no turn signals, missing brake light, broken tail lights, bad brakes, excessive exhaust and so forth but in spite of everything you knew you were in good hands, there was never an accident, the old car moved you from one place to another, faithfully
—the poor man's miracle.
so when that last breakdown did occur, when the valves quit, when the tired pistons cracked, or the crankshaft failed and you sold it for junk
—you then had to watch it carted away hanging there from the back of the tow truck wheeled off as if it had no soul,
the bald rear tires the cracked back window and the twisted license plate were the last things you saw, and it
hurt
as if some woman you loved very much and lived with year after year had died
and now you
would never
again know

her music
her magic
her unbelievable fidelity.

the drowning

for five years I have been looking across the way at the side of a red apartment house.
there must be people in there even love in there whatever that means.
here blows a horn, there sounds a piano, and yesterday's newspapers are as yellow as the grass.
five years.
a man can drown in five years, while the red bricks stand forever.
I hear sounds now like dancing in the air great bladders of blood are being loosed in Mariposa Ave.
sweat drenches my temple like beads on a cold beer can as armies fight in my head.
I see a woman come out of the redbrick apartment house.
she is fat and comfortable the slow horse of her body moves under a dress of pink carnations playing tricks with my better sense and now she is gone and the bricks look back at me the bricks with their windows and the windows look at me and a bird on a telephone wire looks and I feel naked as I try to forget all the good dead.
a band plays wildly LOOKAWAY, LOOKAWAY, DIXIELAND!
as they empty bladders of poison and bags of oranges over Mariposa Ave.
and the cars run through them like poor snow and my pink woman comes back and I try to tell her wait! wait!
don't go back in there!
but she goes inside as my bird flies away and it is just
another hot evening in Los Angeles: some bricks, a mongoose or two, Chimera and disbelief.
(uncollected)

fooling Marie (the poem)

he met her at the racetrack, a strawberry blonde with round hips, well-bosomed, long legs, turned-up nose, flower mouth, in a pink dress, wearing white high-heeled shoes.

she began asking him questions about various horses while looking up at him with her pale blue eyes.

he suggested the bar and they had a drink, then watched the next race together.

he hit fifty-win on a sixty-to-one shot and she jumped up and down.

then she whispered in his ear, “you’re the magic man! I want to fuck you!”

he grinned and said, “I’d like to, but Marie…my wife…”

she laughed, “we’ll go to a motel!”

so they cashed the ticket, went to the parking lot, got into her car. “I’ll drive you back when we’re finished,” she smiled.

they found a motel about a mile west. she parked, they got out, checked in, went to room 302.

they had stopped for a bottle of Jack Daniel’s on the way. he stood and took the glasses out of the cellophane. as she undressed he poured two.

she had a marvelous young body. she sat on the edge of the bed sipping at the Jack Daniel’s as he undressed. he felt awkward, fat and old but knew he was lucky: it promised to be his best day ever.

then he too sat on the edge of the bed with her and his Jack Daniel’s. she reached over and grabbed him between the legs, bent over and went down on him.

he pulled her under the covers and they played some more.

finally, he mounted her and it was great, it was a miracle, but soon it ended, and when she went to the bathroom he poured two more drinks thinking, I’ll shower real good, Marie will never know.

she came out and they sat in bed making small talk.

“I’m going to shower now,” he told her, “I’ll be out soon.”

“o.k., cutie,” she said.

he soaped good in the shower, washing away all the perfume, the woman-smell.

“hurry up, daddy!” he heard her say.

“I won’t be long, baby!” he yelled from the shower.

he got out, toweled off, then opened the bathroom door and stepped out.

the motel room was empty.

she was gone.

on some impulse he ran to the closet, pulled the door open: nothing there but coat hangers.

then he noticed that his clothes were gone, his underwear, his shirt, his pants with the car keys and his wallet, all the money, his shoes, his stockings, everything.

on another impulse he looked under the bed.

nothing.

then he saw the bottle of Jack Daniel’s, half full, standing on the dresser.

he walked over and poured a drink.

as he did he saw the word scrawled on the dresser mirror in pink lipstick: SUCKER.

he drank the whiskey, put the glass down and watched himself in the mirror, very fat, very tired, very old.

he had no idea what to do next.

he carried the whiskey, back to the bed, sat down, lifted the bottle and sucked at it as the light from the boulevard came in through the dusty blinds. then he just sat and looked out and watched the cars, passing back and forth.

the young man on the bus stop bench

he sits all day at the bus stop at Sunset and Western his sleeping bag beside him.
he's dirty.
nobody bothers him.
people leave him alone.
the police leave him alone.
he could be the 2nd coming of Christ but I doubt it.
the soles of his shoes are completely gone.
he just laces the tops on and sits and watches traffic.
I remember my own youthful days (although I traveled lighter) they were similar: park benches
street corners
tarpaper shacks in Georgia for $1.25 a week not wanting the skid row church hand-outs too crazy to apply for relief daytimes spent laying in public parks bugs in the grass biting looking into the sky little insects whirling above my head the breathing of white air just breathing and waiting.
life becomes difficult: being ignored and ignoring.
everything turns into white air the head fills with white air and as invisible women sit in rooms with successful bright-eyed young men conversing brilliantly about everything your sex drive vanishes and it really doesn't matter.
you don't want food you don't want shelter you don't want anything.
sometimes you die
sometimes you don't.
as I drive past
the young man on the bus stop bench I am comfortable in my automobile I have money in two different banks I own my own home but he reminds me of my young self and I want to help him but I don't know what to do.
today when I drove past again he was gone

I suppose finally the world wasn't pleased with him being there.

the bench still sits there on the corner
advertising something.

for they had things to say

the canaries were there, and the lemon tree and the old woman with warts; and I was there, a child and I touched the piano keys as they talked— but not too loudly for they had things to say, the three of them; and I watched them cover the canaries at night with flour sacks: "so they can sleep, my dear."

I played the piano quietly one note at a time, the canaries under their sacks, and there were pepper trees, pepper trees brushing the roof like rain and hanging outside the windows like green rain, and they talked, the three of them sitting in a warm night's semicircle, and the keys were black and white and responded to my fingers like the locked-in magic of a waiting, grown-up world; and now they're gone, the three of them and I am old: pirate feet have trod

the clean-thatched floors of my soul, and the canaries sing no more.

silly damned thing anyhow

we tried to hide it in the house so that the neighbors wouldn’t see.

it was difficult, sometimes we both had to be gone at once and when we returned there would be excreta and urine all about.

it wouldn’t toilet train but it had the bluest eyes you ever saw and it ate everything we did and we often watched tv together.

one evening we came home and it was gone.

there was blood on the floor, there was a trail of blood.

I followed it outside and into the garden and there in the brush it was, mutilated.

there was a sign hung about its severed throat: “we don’t want things like this in our neighborhood.”

I walked to the garage for the shovel.

I told my wife, “don’t come out here.”

then I walked back with the shovel and began digging.

I sensed

the faces watching me from behind drawn blinds.

they had their neighborhood back, a nice quiet neighborhood with green lawns, palm trees, circular driveways, children, churches, a supermarket, etc.

I dug into the earth.

upon reading an interview with a best-selling novelist in our metropolitan daily newspaper

he talks like he writes and he has a face like a dove, untouched by externals.
a little shiver of horror runs through me as I read about his comfortable assured success.
"I am going to write an important novel next year," he says.
next year?
I skip some paragraphs but the interview goes on for two and one-half pages more.
it's like milk spilled on a tablecloth, it's as soothing as talcum powder, it's the bones of an eaten fish, it's a damp stain on a faded necktie, it's a gathering hum.
this man is very fortunate that he is not standing in line at a soup kitchen.
this man has no concept of failure because he is paid so well for it.
I am lying on the bed, reading.
I drop the paper to the floor.
then I hear a sound.
it is a small fly buzzing.
I watch it flying, circling the room in an irregular pattern.
life at last.

harbor freeway south

the dead dogs of nowhere bark as you approach another traffic accident.
3 cars
one standing on its grill the other 2 laying on their sides wheels turning slowly.
3 of them at rest: strange angles in the dark.
it has just happened.
I can see the still bodies inside.
these cars scattered like toys against the freeway center divider.
like spacecraft they have landed there
as you
drive past.
there's no ambulance yet no police cars.
the rain began 15 minutes ago.
things occur.
volcanoes are 1500 times more powerful than the first a bomb.
the dead dogs of nowhere those dogs keep barking.
those cars there like that.
obscene.
a dirty trick.
it's like somebody dying of a heart attack in a crowded elevator
everybody watching.
I finally reach my street pull into the driveway.
park.
get out.
she meets me halfway to the door.
"I don't know what to do,"
she says, "the stove went out."

schoolyards of forever

the schoolyard was a horror show: the bullies, the freaks the beatings up against the wire fence our schoolmates watching glad that they were not the victim; we were beaten well and good time after time and afterwards were
followed
taunted all the way home where often more beatings awaited us.
in the schoolyard the bullies ruled well, and in the restrooms and at the water fountains they owned and disowned us at will but in our own way we held strong never begged for mercy we took it straight on
silently
we were toughened by that horror a horror that would later serve us in good stead and then strangely as we grew stronger and bolder the bullies gradually began to back off.
grammar school
jr. high
high school
we grew up like odd neglected plants gathering nourishment where we could
blossoming in time
and later when the bullies tried to befriend us we turned them away.
then college
where under a new regime
the bullies melted almost entirely away we became more and they became much less.
but there were new bullies now the professors who had to be taught the hard lessons we'd learned we glowed madly it was grand and easy
the coeds dismayed at our gamble and our nerve but we looked right through them to the larger fight waiting out there.

then when we arrived *out there* it was back up against the fence new bullies once again deeply entrenched by society bosses and the like who kept us in our place for de cades to come so we had to begin all over again in the street and in small rooms of madness rooms that were always dim at noon it lasted and lasted for years like that but our former training enabled us to endure

and after what seemed like an eternity

we finally found the tunnel at the end of the light.

it was a small enough victory no songs of braggadocio because we knew we had won very little from very little, and that we had fought so hard to be free just for the simple sweetness of it.

but even now we still can see the grade school janitor with his broom and sleeping face;

we can still see the little girls with their curls their hair so carefully brushed and shining in their freshly starched dresses;

see the faces of the teachers fat folded forlorn;

hear the bell at recess;

see the grass and the baseball diamond; see the volleyball court and its white net; feel the sun always up and shining there spilling down on us like the juice of a giant tangerine.

and we did not soon forget Herbie Ashcroft

our principal tormentor

his fists as hard as rocks as we crouched trapped against the steel fence as we heard the sounds of automobiles passing but not stopping

and as the world went about doing what it does we asked for no mercy and we returned the next day and the next and the next to our classes the little girls looking so calm and secure as they sat upright in their seats in that room of blackboards and chalk while we hung on grimly to our stubborn disdain for all the horror and all the strife and waited for something better to come along and comfort us in that never-to-be-forgotten grammar school world.

in the lobby

I saw him sitting in a lobby chair in the Patrick Hotel dreaming of flying fish and he said “hello friend you’re looking good.
me, I’m not so well,
they’ve plucked out my hair taken my bowels and the color in my eyes has gone back into the sea.”
I sat down and listened to him breathe his last.
a bit later the clerk came over with his green eyeshade on and then the clerk saw what I knew but neither of us knew what the old man knew.
the clerk stood there
almost surprised,
taken,
wondering where the old man had gone.
he began to shake like an ape who’d had a banana taken from his hand.
and then there was a crowd and the crowd looked at the old man
as if he were a freak
as if there was something wrong with him.
I got up and walked out of the lobby I went outside on the sidewalk and I walked along with the rest of them bellies, feet, hair, eyes everything moving and going getting ready to go back to the beginning or light a cigar.
and then somebody stepped on the back of my heel and I was angry enough to swear.

sex

I am driving down Wilton Avenue when this girl of about 15 dressed in tight blue jeans that grip her behind like two hands steps out in front of my car I stop to let her cross the street and as I watch her contours waving she looks directly through my windshield at me with purple eyes and then blows out of her mouth the largest pink globe of bubble gum I have ever seen while I am listening to Beethoven on the car radio.

she enters a small grocery store and is gone and I am left with Ludwig.

a clean, well-lighted place

the old fart, he used his literary reputation to reel them in one at a time, each younger than the last.
he liked to meet them for luncheon and wine and he'd talk and listen to them talk.
what ever wife or girlfriend he had at the moment was made to understand that this sort of thing made him feel "young again."
and when the luncheons became more than luncheons the young ladies vied to bed down with this literary
genius.
in between, he continued to write, and late at night in his favorite bar he liked to talk about writing and his amorous adventures.
actually, he was just a drunk who liked young ladies, writing itself, and talking about writing.
it wasn't a bad life.
it was certainly more interesting than what most men were doing.
at one time he was probably the most famous writer in the world.
many tried to write like he did drink like he did act like he did but he was the original.
then life began to catch up with him.
he began to age quickly.
his large bulk began to wither.
he was growing old before his time.
finally it got to where he couldn't write anymore, "it just wouldn't come"
and the psychiatrists couldn't do anything for him but only made it worse.
then he took his own cure, early one morning, alone just as his father had done many years before.
a writer who can't write any more is dead anyhow.

he knew that.
he knew that what he was killing was already dead.
and then the critics and the hangers-on and the publicists and his heirs moved in
like vultures.

something for the touts, the nuns, the grocery clerks and you…

we have everything and we have nothing and some men do it in churches and some men do it by tearing butterflies in half
and some men do it in Palm Springs laying it into butterblondes with Cadillac souls
Cadillacs and butterflies nothing and everything,
the face melting down to the last puff in a cellar in Corpus Christi.
there’s something for the touts, the nuns, the grocery clerks and you…
something at 8 a.m., something in the library something in the river,
everything and nothing.
in the slaughter house it comes running along the ceiling on a hook, and you swing it— one
two
three
and then you’ve got it, $200 worth of dead meat, its bones against your bones something and nothing.
it’s always early enough to die and it’s always too late,
and the drill of blood in the basin white it tells you nothing at all and the gravediggers playing poker over 5 a.m. coffee, waiting for the grass
to dismiss the frost…
they tell you nothing at all.
we have everything and we have nothing— days with glass edges and the impossible stink of river moss—worse than shit; checkerboard days of moves and countermoves, fagged interest, with as much sense in defeat as in victory; slow days like mules humping it slagged and sullen and sun-glazed up a road where a madman sits waiting among blue jays and wrens netted in and sucked a flakey gray.

good days too of wine and shouting, fights in alleys, fat legs of women striving around your bowels buried in moans, the signs in bullrings like diamonds hollering Mother Capri, violets coming out of the ground telling you to forget the dead armies and the loves that robbed you.

days when children say funny and brilliant things like savages trying to send you a message through their bodies while their bodies are still alive enough to transmit and feel and run up and down without locks and paychecks and ideals and possessions and beetle-like opinions.

days when you can cry all day long in a green room with the door locked, days when you can laugh at the breadman

because his legs are too long, days of looking at hedges…

and nothing, and nothing. the days of the bosses, yellow men

with bad breath and big feet, men who look like frogs, hyenas, men who walk as if melody had never been invented, men who think it is intelligent to hire and fire and profit, men with expensive wives they possess like 60 acres of ground to be drilled or shown off or to be walled away from the incompetent, men who'd kill you because they're crazy and justify it because it's the law, men who stand in front of windows 30 feet wide and see nothing, men with luxury yachts who can sail around the world and yet never get out of their vest pockets, men like snails, men like eels, men like slugs, and not as good…

and nothing. getting your last paycheck at a harbor, at a factory, at a hospital, at an aircraft plant, at a penny arcade, at a barbershop, at a job you didn't want anyway.

income tax, sickness, servility, broken arms, broken heads— all the stuffing come out like an old pillow.

we have everything and we have nothing.

some do it well enough for a while and then give way. fame gets them or disgust or age or lack of proper diet or ink across the eyes or children in college or new cars or broken backs while skiing in Switzerland or new politics or new wives or just natural change and decay— the man you knew yesterday hooking for ten rounds or drinking for three days and three nights by the Sawtooth mountains now just something under a sheet or a cross or a stone or under an easy delusion, or packing a bible or a golf bag or a briefcase: how they go, how they go!—all the ones you thought would never go.

days like this. like your day today.

maybe the rain on the window trying to get through to you. what do you see today?

what is it? where are you? the best days are sometimes the first, sometimes the middle and even sometimes the last.

the vacant lots are not bad, churches in Europe on postcards are not bad. people in wax museums frozen into their best sterility are not bad, horrible but not bad. the cannon, think of the cannon. and toast for breakfast the coffee hot enough you

know your tongue is still there. three geraniums outside a window, trying to be red and trying to be pink and trying to be geraniums. no wonder sometimes the women cry, no wonder the mules don't want to go up the hill. are you in a hotel room in Detroit looking for a cigarette? one more good day. a little bit of it. and as the nurses come out of the building after their shift, having had enough, eight nurses with different names and different places to go—walking across the lawn, some of them want cocoa and a paper, some of them want a hot bath, some of them want a man, some of them are hardly thinking at all. enough and not enough. arcs and pilgrims, oranges, gutters, ferns, antibodies, boxes of tissue paper.

in the most decent sometimes sun there is the softsmoke feeling from urns and the canned sound of old battleplanes and if you go inside and run your finger along the window ledge you'll find dirt, maybe even earth.

and if you look out the window there will be the day, and as you get older you'll keep looking keep looking

sucking your tongue in a little ah ah no no maybe
some do it naturally
some obscenely
everywhere.

blue beads and bones

as the orchid dies and the grass goes insane, let’s have one for the lost:
I met an old man
and a tired whore
in a bar
at 8:00 in the morning across from MacArthur Park— we were sitting over our beers he and I and the old whore who had slept in an unlocked car the night before and wore a blue necklace.
the old guy said to me: “look at my arms. I’m all bone.
no meat on me.”
and he pulled back his sleeves and he was right— bone with just a layer of skin hanging like paper.
he said, “I don’t eat nothin’.”
I bought him a beer and the whore a beer.
now there, I thought, is a man who doesn’t eat meat, he doesn’t eat vegetables. kind of a saint.
it was like a church in there as only the truly lost sit in bars on Tuesday mornings
at 8:00 a.m.
then the whore said, “Jesus, if I don’t score to night I’m finished. I’m scared, I’m really scared. you guys can go to skid row when things get bad. but where can a woman go?”
we couldn’t answer her.
she picked up her beer with one hand and played with her blue beads with the other.
I finished my beer, went to the corner and got a Racing Form from Teddy the newsboy—age 61.
“you got a hot one today?”
“no, Teddy, I gotta see the board; money makes them run.”
“I’ll give you 4 bucks. bet one for me.”
I took his 4 bucks. that would buy a sandwich, pay parking, plus 2

coffees. I got into my car, drove off. too early for the track. blue beads and bones. the universe was bent. a cop rode his bike right up behind me. the day had really begun.

like a cherry seed in the throat

naked in that bright
light
the four horse falls
and throws a 112-pound
boy into the hooves
of 35,000 eyes.
good night, sweet
little
motherfucker.

turnabout

she drives into the parking lot while I am leaning up against the fender of my car.

she's drunk and her eyes are wet with tears: "you son of a bitch, you fucked me when you didn't want to. you told me to keep phoning you, you told me to move closer into town, then you told me to leave you alone."

it's all quite dramatic and I enjoy it.

"sure, well, what do you want?"

"I want to talk to you, I want to go to your place and talk to you…"

"I'm with somebody now. she's in getting a sandwich."

"I want to talk to you…it takes a while to get over things. I need more time."

"sure. wait until she comes out. we're not inhuman. we'll all have a drink together."

"shit," she says, "oh shit!"

she jumps into her car and drives off.

the other one comes out: "who was that?"

"an ex-friend."

now *she's* gone and I'm sitting here drunk and my eyes seem wet with tears.

it's very quiet and I feel like I have a spear rammed into the center of my gut.

I walk to the bathroom and puke.

mercy, I think, doesn't the human race know anything about mercy?

mystery leg

first of all, I had a hard time, a very hard time locating the parking lot for the building.

it wasn't off the main boulevard where the cars all driven by merciless killers were doing 55 mph in a 25 mph zone.

the man riding my bumper so close I could see his snarling face in my rearview mirror caused me to miss the narrow alley that would have allowed me to circle the west end of the building in search of parking.

I went to the next street, took a right, then took another right, spotted the building, a blue heartless-looking structure, then took another right and finally saw it, a tiny sign: *parking.*

I drove in.

the guard had the wooden red and white barrier down.

he stuck his head out a little window.

"yeah?" he asked.

he looked like a retired hit man.

"to see Dr. Manx," I said.

he looked at me disdainfully, then said, "go ahead!"

the red and white barrier lifted.

I drove in,

drove around and around.

I finally found a parking spot a good distance away, a football field away.

I walked in.

I finally found the entrance and the elevator

and the floor

and then the office number.

I walked in.

the waiting room was full.

there was an old lady talking to the receptionist.

"but can't I see him now?"

"Mrs. Miller, you are here at the right time but on the wrong day.

this is Wednesday, you'll have to come back Friday."

"but I took a cab. I'm an old lady, I have almost no money, can't I see him now?"

"Mrs. Miller, I'm sorry but your appointment is on Friday, you'll have to come back then."

Mrs. Miller turned away: unwanted, old and poor, she walked to the door.

I stepped up smartly, informed them who I was.

I was told to sit down and wait.

I sat with the others.

then I noticed the magazine rack.

I walked over and looked at the magazines.

it was odd: they weren't of recent vintage: in fact, all of them were over a year old.

I sat back down.

30 minutes passed.

45 minutes passed.

an hour passed.

the man next to me spoke:

"I've been waiting an hour and a half," he said.

"that's hell," I said, "they shouldn't do that!"

he didn't reply.

just then the receptionist called my name.

I got up and told her that the other man had been waiting an hour and a half.

she acted as if she hadn't heard.

"please follow me," she said.

I followed her down a dark hall, then she opened a door, pointed. "in there," she said.

I walked in and she closed the door behind me.

I sat down and looked at a map of the human body hanging from the wall.

I could see the veins, the heart, the intestines, all that.

it was cold in there and dark, darker than in the hall.

I waited maybe 15 minutes before the door opened.

it was Dr. Manx.

he was followed by a tired-looking young lady in a white gown; she held a clipboard; she looked depressed.

"well, now," said Dr. Manx, "what is it?"

"it's my leg," I said.

I saw the lady writing on the clipboard.

she wrote LEG.

"what is it about the leg?" asked the Dr.

"it hurts," I said.

PAIN wrote the lady.

then she saw me looking at the clipboard and turned away.

"did you fill out the form they gave you at the desk?" the Dr. asked.

"they didn't give me a form," I said.

"Florence," he said, "give him a form."

Florence pulled a form out from her clipboard, handed it to me.

"fill that out," said Dr. Manx, "we'll be right back."

then they were gone and I worked at the form.

it was the usual: name, address, phone, employer, relatives, etc.

there was also a long list of questions.

I marked them all "no."

then I sat there.

20 minutes passed.

then they were back.

the doctor began twisting my leg.

"it's the *right* leg," I said.

"oh," he said.

Florence wrote something on her clipboard.

probably RIGHT LEG.

he switched to the right leg.

"does that hurt?"

"a little."

"not real bad?"

"no."

"does *this* hurt?"

"a little."

"not real bad?"

"well, the whole leg hurts but when you do that, it hurts more."

"but not *real* bad?"

"what's real bad?"

"like you can't stand on it."

"I can stand on it."

"hmmm…stand up!"

"all right."

"now, rock on your toes, back and forth, back and forth."

I did.

"hurt real bad?" he asked.

"just medium."

"you know what?" Dr. Manx asked.

"no."

"we've got a Mystery Leg here!"

Florence wrote something on the clipboard.

"I have?"

"yes, I don't know yet what's wrong with it.

I want you to come back in 30 days."

"30 days?"

"yes, and stop at the desk on your way out, see the girl."

then they walked out.

at the checkout desk there was a long row of bottles waiting, white bottles with bright orange labels.

the girl at the desk looked at me.

"take 4 of those bottles."

I did.

she didn't offer me a bag so I stuck them in my pockets.

"that'll be $143," she said.

"$143?" I asked.

"it's for the pills," she said.

I pulled out my credit card.

"oh, we don't take credit cards," she told me.

"but I don't have that much money on me."

“how much do you have?”

I looked in my wallet.

“23 dollars.”

“we’ll take that and bill you for the rest.”

I handed her the money.

“see you in 30 days,” she smiled.

I walked out and into the waiting room.

the man who had been waiting an hour and a half was still there.

I walked out into the hall, found the elevator.

then I was on the first floor and out into the parking lot.

my car was still a football field away and my right leg began to hurt like hell, after all that twisting Dr.

Manx had done to it.

I moved slowly to my car, got in.

it started and soon I was out on the boulevard again.

the 4 bottles of pills bulged painfully in my pockets as I drove along.

now I only had one problem left, I had to tell my wife I had a Mystery Leg.

I could hear her already: “what? you mean he couldn’t tell you what was *wrong* with your leg?

what do you *mean,* he didn’t know?

and what are those PILLS?

here, let me see those!”

as I drove along, I switched on the radio in search of some soothing music.

there wasn’t any.

the girl outside the supermarket

a very tall girl lifts her nose at me outside a supermarket as if I were a walking garbage can; and I had no desire for her, no more desire than for a
phone pole.
what was her message?
that I would never see the top of her pantyhose?
I am a man in his 50s sex is no longer an aching mystery to me, so I can't understand being snubbed by a phone pole.
I'll leave young girls to young men.
it's a lonely world of frightened people, just as it has always been.
(uncollected)

it is not much

I suppose like others I have come through fire and sword, love gone wrong, head-on crashes, drunk at sea, and I have listened to the simple sound of water running in tubs and wished to drown

but simply couldn't bear the others carrying my body down three flights of stairs to the round mouths of curious biddies; the psyche has been burned and left us senseless, the world has been darker than lights out in a closet full of hungry bats, and the whiskey and wine entered our veins when blood was too weak to carry on; and it will happen to others, and our few good times will be rare because we have a critical sense and are not easy to fool with laughter; small gnats crawl our screen but we see through to a wasted landscape and let them have their moment; we only asked for leopards to guard our thinning dreams.

I once lay in a

white hospital

for the dying and the dying self, where some god pissed a rain of reason to make things grow only to die, where on my knees

I prayed for LIGHT,

I prayed for 1*i*g*h*t, and praying crawled like a blind slug into the web where threads of wind stuck against my mind and I died of pity for Man, for myself, on a cross without nails, watching in fear as the pig belches in his sty, farts, blinks and eats.

2 Outside, As Bones Break in My Kitchen

they get up on their garage roof both of them 80 or 90 years old standing on the slant she wanting to fall really all the way but hacking at the old roofing with a hoe

and he

more coward on his knees praying for more days gluing chunks of tar his ear listening for more green rain more green rain and he says mama be careful

and she says nothing and hacks a hole where a tulip never grew.

The Japanese Wife

O lord, he said, Japanese women, real women, they have not forgotten, bowing and smiling
closing the wounds men have made; but American women will kill you like they tear a lampshade,
American women care less than a dime, they've gotten derailed,
they're too nervous to make good: always scowling, belly-aching, disillusioned, overwrought;
but oh lord, say, the Japanese women: there was this one,
I came home and the door was locked and when I broke in she broke out the bread knife and chased me under the bed
and her sister came
and they kept me under that bed for two days, and when I came out, at last, she didn't mention attorneys, just said, you will never wrong me again, and I didn't; but she died on me, and dying, said, you can wrong me now, and I did,
but you know, I felt worse then than when she was living;
there was no voice, no knife, nothing but little Japanese prints on the wall, all those tiny people sitting by red rivers with flying green birds,
and I took them down and put them face down in a drawer with my shirts,
and it was the first time I realized that she was dead, even though I buried her; and some day I'll take them all out again, all the tan-faced little people sitting happily by their bridges and huts and mountains— but not right now,
not just yet.

the harder you try

the waste of words continues with a stunning persistence as the waiter runs by carrying the loaded tray for all the wise white boys who laugh at us.

no matter. no matter, as long as your shoes are tied and nobody is walking too close behind.

just being able to scratch yourself and be nonchalant is victory enough.

those constipated minds that seek larger meaning will be dispatched with the other garbage.

back off.

if there is light it will find you.

the lady in red

people went into vacant lots and pulled up greens to cook and the men rolled Bull Durham or smoked Wings (10¢ a pack) and the dogs were thin and the cats were thin and the cats learned how to catch mice and rats and the dogs caught and killed the cats (some of the cats), and gophers tore up the earth and people killed them by attaching garden hoses to the exhaust pipes of their cars and sticking the hoses into the gopher holes and when the gophers came out the cats and the dogs and the people were afraid of them, they circled and showed their long thin teeth, then they stopped and shivered and as they did the cats rushed in followed by the dogs. people raised chickens in their back yards and the roosters were weak and the hens were thin and the people ate them if they didn't lay eggs fast enough, and the best time of all was when John Dillinger escaped from jail, and one of the saddest times of all was when the Lady in Red fingered him and he was gunned down coming out of that movie.

Pretty Boy Floyd, Baby Face Nelson, Machine Gun Kelly, Ma Barker, Alvin Karpis, we loved them all. and there were always wars starting in China and they never lasted long but the newspapers had big black headlines: WAR IN CHINA! the '30s were a time when people had very little and there was nothing to hide behind, and that Bull Durham tag dangling from the string coming out of your pocket—that showed you had it, you could roll with one hand—plenty of time to practice and if somebody looked at you wrong or said something you didn't like you cracked him one right in the mouth. it was a glorious non-bullshit time, especially after we got rid of Herbert Hoover.

the shower

we like to shower afterwards (I like the water hotter than she) and her face is always soft and peaceful and she'll wash me first spread the soap over my balls lift the balls squeeze them,

then wash the cock:

"hey, this thing is still hard!"

then get all the hair down there,— the belly, the back, the neck, the legs, I grin grin grin, and then I wash her…

first the cunt, I

stand behind her, my cock in the cheeks of her ass I gently soap up the cunt hairs, wash there with a soothing motion, I linger perhaps longer than necessary, then I get the backs of the legs, the ass, the back, the neck, I turn her, kiss her, soap up the breasts, get them and the belly, the neck, the fronts of the legs, the ankles, the feet, and then the cunt, once more, for luck…

another kiss, and she gets out first, toweling, sometimes singing while I stay in turn the water on hotter feeling the good times of love's miracle I then get out…

it is usually mid-afternoon and quiet, and getting dressed we talk about what else there might be to do, but being together solves most of it,

in fact, solves all of it for as long as those things stay solved in the history of woman and man, it's different for each better and worse for each— for me, it's splendid enough to remember past the marching of armies and the horses that walk the streets outside past the memories of pain and defeat and unhappiness: Linda, you brought it to me, when you take it away do it slowly and easily make it as if I were dying in my sleep instead of in my life, amen.

i was glad

I was glad I had money in the Savings and Loan Friday afternoon hungover I didn't have a job
I was glad I had money in the Savings and Loan I didn't know how to play a guitar Friday afternoon hungover
Friday afternoon hungover
across the street from Norm's
across the street from The Red Fez
I was glad I had money in the Savings and Loan split with my girlfriend and blue and demented I was glad to have my passbook and stand in line
I watched the buses run up Vermont
I was too crazy to get a job as a driver of buses and I didn't even look at the young girls
I got dizzy standing in line but I
just kept thinking I have money in this building Friday afternoon hungover
I didn't know how to play the piano or even hustle a damnfool job in a carwash I was glad I had money in the Savings and Loan
finally I was at the window
it was my Japanese girl
she smiled at me as if I were some amazing god
back again, eh? she said and laughed as I showed her my withdrawal slip and my passbook as the buses ran up and down Vermont
the camels trotted across the Sahara she gave me the money and I took the money Friday afternoon hungover
I walked into the market and got a cart and I threw sausages and eggs and bacon and bread in there I threw beer and salami and relish and pickles and mustard in there
I looked at the young house wives wiggling casually I threw t-bone steaks and porter house and cube steaks in my cart and tomatoes and cucumbers and oranges in my cart

Friday afternoon hungover

split with my girlfriend and blue and demented I was glad I had money in the Savings and Loan.

the angel who pushed his wheelchair

long ago he edited a little magazine it was up in San Francisco during the beat era
during the reading-poetry-with-jazz experiments and I remember him because he never returned my manuscripts even though I wrote him many letters, humble letters, sane letters, and, at last, violent letters; I'm told he jumped off a roof because a woman wouldn't love him.
no matter. when I saw him again he was in a wheelchair and carried a wine bottle to piss in; he wrote very delicate poetry that I, naturally, couldn't understand; he autographed his book for me (which he said I wouldn't like) and once at a party I threatened to punch him and I was drunk and he wept and I took pity and instead hit the next poet who walked by on the head with his piss bottle; so, we had an understanding after all.
he had this very thin and intense woman pushing him about, she was his arms and legs and maybe for a while his heart.
it was almost commonplace
at poetry readings where he was scheduled to read to see her swiftly rolling him in, sometimes stopping by me, saying, "I don't see *how* we are going to get him up on the stage!"
sometimes she did. often she did.
then *she* began writing poetry, I didn't see much of it, but, somehow, I was glad for her.
then she injured her neck while doing her yoga and she went on disability, and again I was glad for her, all the poets wanted to get disability insurance it was better than immortality.
I met her in the market one day in the bread section, and she held my hands and trembled all over and I wondered if they ever had sex those two. well, they had the muse anyhow and she told me she was writing poetry and articles but really more poetry, she was really writing a lot, and that's the last I saw of her until one night somebody told me she'd o.d.'d and I said, no, not her and they said, yes, her.

it was a day or so later
sometime in the afternoon
I had to go to the Los Feliz post office to mail some dirty stories to a sex mag.
coming back
outside a church
I saw these smiling creatures so many of them smiling
the men with beards and long hair and wearing blue jeans and most of the women blonde with sunken cheeks and tiny grins,
and I thought, ah, a wedding, a nice old-fashioned wedding, and then I saw him on the sidewalk in his wheelchair tragic yet somehow calm
looking grayer, a profile like a tamed hawk, and I knew it was her funeral, she had really o.d.'d and he did look tragic out there.
I *do* have feelings, you know.
maybe to night I'll try to read his book.

a time to remember

at North Avenue 21 drunk tank you slept on the floor and at night there was always some guy who would step on your face on his way to the crapper

and then you would curse him good, set him straight, so that he would know enough to either be more careful or to just lay there and hold it.

there was a large hill in back dense with foliage you could see it through the barred window and a few of the guys after being released would not go back to skid row, they'd just walk up into that green hill where they lived like animals.

part of it was a campground and some lived out of the trash cans while others trekked back to skid row for meals but then returned

and they all sold their blood each week for wine.

there must have been 18 or 20 of them up there and they were more or less just as happy as corporate lawyers stockbrokers or airline pi lots.

civilization is divided into parts, like an orange, and when you peel the skin off, pull the sections apart, chew it, the final result is a mouthful of pale pulp which you can either swallow or spit

out.

some just swallow it

like the guys down at North Avenue 21.

the wrong way

luxury ocean liners crossing the water full of the indolent and rich passing from this place to that with their hearts gone and their guts empty like Xmas turkeys the great blue sky above wasted all that water wasted all those
fingers, heads, toes, buttocks, eyes, ears, legs, feet asleep in their American Express Card staterooms.
it’s like a floating tomb going nowhere.
these are the floating dead.
yet the dead are not ugly but the near-dead surely are most
surely are.
when do they laugh?
what do they think about love?
what are they doing
midst all that water?
and where do they seek to go?

no wonder

Tony phoned and told me that Jan had left him but that he was all right; it helped him he said to think about other great men like D. H. Lawrence pissed off with life in general but still milking his cow; or to think about

T. Dreiser with his masses of copious notes painfully constructing his novels which then made the very walls applaud; or I think about van Gogh, Tony continued, a madman who continued to make great paintings as the village children threw rocks at his window; or, there was Harry Crosby and his mistress in that fancy hotel room, dying together, swallowed by the Black Sun; or, take Tchaikovsky, that homo, marrying a female opera singer and then standing in a freezing river hoping to catch pneumonia while she went mad; or Dos Passos, after all those left-wing books, putting on a suit and a necktie and voting Republican; or that homo Lorca, shot dead in the road, supposedly for his politics but really because the mayor of that town thought his wife had the hots for the poet; or that other homo Crane, jumping over the rail of the boat and into the propellor because while drunk he had promised to marry some woman; or Dostoyevsky crucified on the roulette wheel with Christ on his mind; or Hemingway, getting his ass kicked by Callaghan

(but Hem was correct in maintaining that F.

Scott couldn't write);

or sometimes, Tony continued, I remember that guy with syphilis who went mad and just kept rowing in circles on some lake—a Frenchman—anyhow, he wrote great short stories…

listen, I asked, you gonna be all right?

sure, sure, he answered, just thought I'd phone, good night.

and he hung up

and I hung up, thinking Jesus Christ no wonder Jan left him.

a threat to my immortality

she undressed in front of me keeping her pussy to the front while I lay in bed with a bottle of beer.

where'd you get that wart on your ass? I asked.

that's no wart, she said, that's a mole, a kind of birthmark.

that thing scares me, I said, let's call it off.

I got out of bed and walked into the other room and sat on the rocker and rocked.

she walked out. now, listen, you old fart. you've got warts and scars and all kinds of things all over you. I do believe you're the ugliest old man I've ever seen.

forget that, I said, tell me some more about that mole on your butt.

she walked into the other room and got dressed and then ran past me slammed the door and was gone.

and to think,

she'd read all my books of poetry too.

I just hoped she wouldn't tell anybody that I wasn't pretty.

my telephone

the telephone has not been kind of late, of late there have been more and more calls from people who want to come over and talk from people who are depressed from people who are lonely from people who just don't know what to do with their time; I'm no snob, I try to help, try to suggest something that might be of assistance but there have been more calls more and more calls and what the callers don't realize is that I too have problems

and even when I don't it's necessary for me sometimes

just to be alone and quiet and doing nothing.

so the other day after many days of listening to depressed and lonely people wanting me to assuage their grief, I was lying there enjoying looking at the ceiling when the phone rang and I picked it up and said, "listen, what ever your problem is or what ever it is you want, I can't help you."

after a moment of silence whoever it was hung up and I felt like a man who had escaped.

I napped then, perhaps an hour, when the phone rang again and I picked it up: "what ever your problem is I can't help you!"

"is this Mr. Chinaski?"

"yes."

"this is Helen at your dentist's office to remind you that you have an appointment at 3:30 tomorrow afternoon."

I told her I'd be there for her.

Carson McCullers

she died of alcoholism wrapped in a blanket on a deck chair on an ocean steamer.
all her books of terrified loneliness
all her books about the cruelty of loveless love
were all that was left of her
as the strolling vacationer discovered her body
notified the captain
and she was quickly dispatched to somewhere else on the ship
as everything continued just as she had written it.

Mongolian coasts shining in light

Mongolian coasts shining in light,
I listen to the pulse of the sun,
the tiger is the same to all of us
and high oh
so high on the branch
our oriole
sings.

putrefaction

of late
I've had this thought that this country has gone backwards 4 or 5 de cades and that all the social advancement the good feeling of person toward person has been washed away and replaced by the same old bigotries.
we have
more than ever the selfish wants of power the disregard for the weak the old
the impoverished the helpless.
we are replacing want with war salvation with slavery.
we have wasted the gains
we have become rapidly less.
we have our Bomb it is our fear our damnation and our shame.
now
something so sad has hold of us that the breath leaves and we can't even cry.

where was Jane?

one of the first actors to play Tarzan was living at the Motion Picture Home.
he'd been there for years waiting to die.
he spent much of his time
running in and out of the wards into the cafeteria and out into the yard where he'd yell, "ME TARZAN!"
he never spoke to anyone or said anything else, it was always just "ME TARZAN!"
everybody liked him: the old actors, the retired directors, the ancient script writers, the aged cameramen, the prop men, stunt men, the old actresses, all of whom were also there waiting to die; they enjoyed his verve, his antics, he was harmless and he took them back to the time when they were still in the business.
then the doctors in authority decided that Tarzan was possibly dangerous and one day he was shipped off to a mental institution.
he vanished as suddenly as if he'd been eaten by a lion.
and the other patients were outraged, they instituted legal proceedings to have him returned at once but it took some months.
when Tarzan returned he was changed.
he would not leave his room.
he just sat by the window as if he had forgotten
his old role
and the other patients missed his antics, his verve, and they too felt somehow defeated and diminished.
they complained about the change in Tarzan doped and drugged in his room and they knew he would soon die like that and then he did and then he was back in that other jungle (to where we will all someday retire) unleashing the joyful primal call they could no longer hear.

there were some small notices in the newspapers and the paint continued to chip from the hospital walls, many plants died, there was an unfortunate suicide, a growing lack of trust and

hope, and

a pervasive sadness:

it wasn't so much Tarzan's death the others mourned, it was the cold, willful attitude of the young and powerful doctors despite the wishes of the

helpless old.

and finally they knew the truth while sitting in their rooms that it wasn't only the attitude of the doctors

they had to fear,

and that as silly as all those Tarzan films had been, and as much as they would miss their own lost Tarzan, that all that was much kinder than the final vigil they would now have to sit and patiently endure alone.

something about a woman

ah, Merryman, a fighter on the docks, killed a man while they were unloading bananas.
I mean the man he killed clubbed him first from behind with an anchor chain (something about a woman) and we all circled around while Merryman
did him in
under a hard-on sun, finally strangling him to death throwing him into the ocean.
Merryman leaped to the dock and walked
away, nobody tried to stop him.
then we went back to work and unloaded the rest of the bananas.
nothing was ever said about the murder between any of us and I never saw anything about it in the papers.
although I saw some of the bananas later in the
markets:
2 lbs. for a quarter they seemed a bargain.
(uncollected)

Sunday lunch at the Holy Mission

he got knifed in broad daylight, came up the street holding his hands over his gut, dripping red on the pavement.
nobody waiting in line left their place to help him.
he made it to the Mission doorway, collapsed in the lobby where the desk clerk screamed, “hey, you son-of-a-bitch, what are you doing?”
then he called an ambulance but the man was dead when they got there.
the police came and circled the spots of blood on the pavement with white chalk
photographed everything then asked the men waiting for their Sunday meal if they had seen anything if they knew anything.
they all said “no” to both.
while the police strutted in their uniforms the others finally loaded the body into an ambulance.
afterwards the homeless men rolled cigarettes as they waited for their meal talking about the action blowing farts and smoke enjoying the sun feeling quite like
celebrities.

trashcan lives

the wind blows hard to night and it's a cold wind and I think about the boys on the row.
I hope some of them have a bottle of red.
it's when you're on the row that you notice that *everything* is owned and that there are locks on *everything.*
this is the way a democracy works: you get what you can, try to keep that and add to it if possible.
this is the way a dictatorship works too only they either enslave or destroy their derelicts.
we just forget ours.
in either case it's a hard cold
wind.

school days

I'm in bed.
it's morning
and I hear:
where are your socks?
please get dressed!
why does it take you so long to get dressed?
where's the brush?
all right, I'll give you a head band!
what time is it?
where's the clock?
where did you put the clock?
aren't you dressed yet?
where's the brush?
where's your sandwich?
did you make a sandwich?
I'll make your sandwich.
honey and peanut butter.
and an orange.
there.
where's the brush?
I'll use a comb.
all right, holler. you lost the brush!
where did you lose the brush?
all right. now isn't that better?
where's your coat?
go find your coat.
your coat has to be around somewhere!
listen, what are you doing?
what are you playing with?
now you've spilled it all!
I hear them open the door go down the stairway, get into the car.

I hear them drive away. they are gone, down the hill on the way to nursery school.

grass

at the window
I watch a man with a power mower the sounds of his doing race like flies and bees on the wallpaper, it is like a warm fire, and better than eating steak, and the grass is green enough and the sun is sun enough and what’s left of my life stands there checking glints of green flying; it is a giant disrobing of care, stumbling away from doing.
suddenly I understand old men in rockers bats in Colorado caves tiny lice crawling into the eyes of dead birds.
back and forth
he follows his gasoline sound. it is interesting enough, with the streets
flat on their Spring backs and smiling.

crucifix in a deathhand

yes, they begin out in a willow, I think the starch mountains begin out in the willow and keep right on going without regard for pumas and nectarines somehow these mountains are like an old woman with a bad memory and a shopping basket.

we are in a basin. that is the idea. down in the sand and the alleys, this land punched-in, cuffed-out, divided, held like a crucifix in a deathhand, this land bought, resold, bought again and sold again, the wars long over, the Spaniards all the way back in Spain down in the thimble again, and now real estaters, subdividers, landlords, freeway engineers arguing. this is their land and I walk on it, live on it a little while near Hollywood here I see young men in rooms listening to glazed recordings and I think too of old men sick of music sick of everything, and death like suicide I think is sometimes voluntary, and to get your hold on the land here it is best to return to the Grand Central Market, see the old Mexican women, the poor…I am sure you have seen these same women many years before arguing

with the same young Japanese clerks witty, knowledgeable and golden among their soaring store of oranges, apples

avocados, tomatoes, cucumbers— and you know how *these* look, they do look good as if you could eat them all light a cigar and smoke away the bad world.

then it's best to go back to the bars, the same bars wooden, stale, merciless, green with the young policeman walking through scared and looking for trouble, and the beer is still bad

it has an edge that already mixes with vomit and decay, and you've got to be strong in the shadows to ignore it, to ignore the poor and to ignore yourself and the shopping bag between your legs down there feeling good with its avocados and oranges and fresh fish and wine bottles, who needs a Fort Lauderdale winter?

25 years ago there used to be a whore there with a film over one eye, who was too fat and made little silver bells out of cigarette tinfoil. the sun seemed warmer then although this was probably not true, and you take your shopping bag outside and walk along the street and the green beer hangs there just above your stomach like

a short and shameful shawl, and you look around and no longer

see any

old men.

the screw-game

one of the terrible things is really being in bed night after night with a woman you no longer want to screw.

they get old, they don't look very good anymore—they even tend to snore, lose spirit.

so, in bed, you turn sometimes, your foot touches hers— god, *awful!*— and the night is out there beyond the curtains sealing you together in the tomb.

and in the morning you go to the bathroom, pass in the hall, talk, say odd things; eggs fry, motors start.

but sitting across you have 2 strangers jamming toast into mouths burning the sullen head and gut with coffee.

in 10 million places in America it is the same— stale lives propped against each other and no place to go.

you get in the car and you drive to work and there are more strangers there, most of them wives and husbands of somebody else, and besides the guillotine of work, they flirt and joke and pinch, sometimes tend to work off a quick screw somewhere— they can't do it at home— and then the drive back home waiting for Christmas or Labor Day or Sunday or something.

millionaires

you no faces no faces at all laughing at nothing— let me tell you I have drunk in skid row rooms with imbecile winos whose cause was better whose eyes still held some light whose voices retained some sensibility, and when the morning came we were sick but not ill, poor but not deluded, and we stretched in our beds and rose in the late afternoons like millionaires.

when you wait for the dawn to crawl through the screen like a burglar to take your life away

screen like a burglar to take your life away the snake had crawled the hole, and she said, tell me about yourself.
and I said, I was beaten down long ago in some alley in another world.
and she said, we're all like pigs slapped down some lane, our grassbrains singing toward the blade.
by
god, you're an odd one, I said.
we
sat there
smoking cigarettes at 5
in the morning.

the talkers

the boy walks with his muddy feet across my soul talking about recitals, virtuosi, conductors, the lesser known novels of Dostoyevsky; talking about how he corrected a waitress, *a hasher* who didn't know that French dressing was composed of *so and so;* he gabbles about the Arts until I hate the Arts, and there is nothing cleaner than getting back to a bar or back to the track and watching them run, watching things go without this clamor and chatter, talk, talk, talk, the small mouth going, the eyes blinking, a boy, a child, sick with the Arts, grabbing at it like the skirt of a mother, and I wonder how many tens of thousands there are like him across the land on rainy nights on sunny mornings on evenings meant for peace in concert halls in cafes

at poetry recitals talking, soiling, arguing.

it's like a pig going to bed with a good woman and you don't want the woman any more.

art

as the
spirit
wanes
the
form
appears.

advice for some young man in the year 2064 A.D.

let me speak as a friend although the centuries hang between us and neither you nor I can see the moon.

be careful less the onion blind the eye or the snake sting or the beetle possess the house or the lover your wife or the government your child or the wine your will or the doctor your heart or the butcher your belly or the cat your chair or the lawyer your ignorance of the law or the law dressed as a uniformed man and killing you.

dismiss perfection as an ache of the greedy but do not give in to the mass modesty of easy imperfection.

and remember

the belly of the whale is laden with great men.

(uncollected)

ice for the eagles

I keep remembering the horses under the moon I keep remembering feeding the horses sugar white oblongs of sugar more like ice, and they had heads like eagles

bald heads that could bite and did not.

The horses were more real than my father more real than God and they could have stepped on my feet but they didn't they could have done all kinds of horrors but they didn't.

I was almost 5

but I have not forgotten yet; o my god they were strong and good those red tongues slobbering out of their souls.

girl in a mini skirt reading the Bible outside my window

outside my window Sunday. I am eating a grapefruit. church is over at the Russian Orthodox to the west.

she is dark of Eastern descent, large brown eyes look up from the Bible then down. a small red and black Bible, and as she reads her legs keep moving, moving, she is doing a slow rhythmic dance reading the Bible…

long gold earrings; 2 gold bracelets on each arm, and it's a mini-*suit*, I suppose, the cloth hugs her body, the lightest of tans is that cloth, she twists this way and that, long young legs warm in the sun…

there is no escaping her being there is no desire to…

my radio is playing symphonic music that she cannot hear but her movements coincide *exactly*

to the rhythms of the symphony…

she is dark, she is dark she is reading about God.

I am God.

hell is a lonely place

he was 65, his wife was 66, had Alzheimer's disease.
he had cancer of the mouth.
there were operations, radiation treatments which decayed the bones in his jaw which then had to be wired.
daily he put his wife in rubber diapers like a baby.
unable to drive in his condition he had to take a taxi to the medical center, had difficulty speaking, had to write the directions down.
on his last visit they informed him there would be another operation: a bit more
left
cheek and a bit more tongue.
when he returned he changed his wife's diapers put on the tv dinners, watched the evening news then went to the bedroom, got the gun, put it to her temple, fired.
she fell to the left, he sat upon the couch put the gun into his mouth, pulled the trigger.
the shots didn't arouse the neighbors.
later
the burning tv dinners did.
somebody arrived, pushed the door open, saw it.
soon
the police arrived and went through their routine, found some items: a closed savings account and a checkbook with a balance of $1.14
suicide, they deduced.
in three weeks there were two new tenants: a computer engineer named Ross
and his wife Anatana
who studied ballet.
they looked like another upwardly mobile pair.

the girls and the birds

the girls were young and worked the streets but often couldn’t score, they ended up in my hotel room 3 or 4 of them
sucking at the wine, hair in face, runs in stockings, cursing, telling stories…
somehow those were peaceful nights
but really they reminded me of long ago when I was a boy watching my grandmother’s canaries make
droppings into their seed and into their water and the canaries were beautiful and chattered but
never
sang.

1813–1883

listening to Wagner as outside in the dark the wind blows a cold rain the trees wave and shake lights go off and on the walls creak and the cats run under the bed…
Wagner battles the agonies, he's emotional but solid, he's the supreme fighter, a giant in a world of pygmies, he takes it straight on through, he breaks barriers an astonishing FORCE of sound as
everything here shakes shivers bends
blasts
in fierce gamble
yes, Wagner and the storm intermix with the wine as nights like this run up my wrists and up into my head and back down into the gut
some men never die and some men never live
but we're all alive to night.

no leaders, please

invent yourself and then reinvent yourself, don't swim in the same slough.
invent yourself and then reinvent yourself and stay out of the clutches of mediocrity.
invent yourself and then reinvent yourself, change your tone and shape so often that they can never categorize you.
reinvigorate yourself and accept what is but only on the terms that you have invented and reinvented.
be self-taught.
and reinvent your life because you must; it is your life and its history and the present belong only to you.

song

Julio came by with his guitar and sang his latest song.
Julio was famous, he wrote songs and also published books of little drawings and poems.
they were very good.
Julio sang a song about his latest love affair.
he sang that
it began so well then it went to hell.
those were not the words exactly but that was the meaning of the words.
Julio finished singing.
then he said, “I still care for her, I can’t get her off my mind.”
“what will I do?” Julio asked.
“drink,” Henry said, pouring.
Julio just looked at his glass: “I wonder what she’s doing now?”
“probably engaging in oral copulation,” Henry suggested.
Julio put his guitar back in the case and walked to the
door.
Henry walked Julio to his car which was parked in the drive.
it was a nice moonlit night.
as Julio started his car and backed out the drive Henry waved him a farewell.
then he went inside sat
down.
he finished Julio’s untouched drink
then he
phoned
her.
“he was just by,” Henry told her, “he’s feeling very bad…”
“you’ll have to excuse me,”
she said, “but I’m busy right now.”
she hung
up.

and Henry poured one of his own as outside the crickets sang their own song.

one for Sherwood Anderson

sometimes I forget about him and his peculiar innocence, almost idiotic, awkward and mawkish, he liked walking over bridges and through cornfields.
to night I think about him, the way the lines were, one felt space between his lines, air and he told it so the lines remained carved there something like van Gogh.
he took his time
looking about
sometimes running to save something leaving everything to save something, then at other times giving it all away.
he didn’t understand Hemingway’s neon tattoo, found Faulkner much too clever.
he was a midwestern hick he took his time.
he was as far away from Fitzgerald as he was from Paris.
he told stories and left the meaning open and sometimes he told meaningless stories because that was the way it was.
he told the same story again and again and he never wrote a story that was unreadable.
and nobody ever talks about his life or his death.

bow wow love

here things are tough but they're mostly always tough.
basically I'm just trying to get along with the female. when you first meet them their eyes are all moist with understanding; laughter abounds like sand fleas. then, Jesus, time tinkles on and things leak. they
start BOOMING out DEMANDS.
and, actually, what they *demand* is basically contrary to whatever you are or could be.
what's so strange is the sudden knowledge that they've never read anything you've written, not really read it at all. or worse, if they have, they've come to SAVE
you! which means mainly wanting you to act like everybody else and be just like them and their friends. meanwhile they've sucked you up and wound you up in a million webs, and being somewhat of a feeling person you *can't* help but remember their good side or the side that at first *seemed* to be good.
and so you find yourself alone in your
bedroom grabbing your gut and saying, o, shit no, not again.
we should have known.
maybe we wanted cotton candy luck. maybe we believed. what trash.
we believed like dogs believe.
(uncollected)

the day the epileptic spoke

the other day I'm out at the track betting Early Bird (that's when you bet at the track before it opens) I am sitting there having a coffee and going over the Form and this guy slides toward me— his body is twisted his head shakes his eyes are out of focus there is spittle upon his lips
he manages to get close to me and asks, "pardon me, sir, but could you tell me the number of Lady of Dawn in the first race?"
"it's the 7 horse,"
I tell him.
"thank you, sir,"
he says.
that night or the next morning
really:
12:04 a.m.
Los Alamitos Quarter Horse Results on radio KLAC
the man told me Lady of Dawn won the first at $79.80
that was two weeks ago and I've been there every racing day since and I haven't seen that poor epileptic fellow again.
the gods have ways of telling you things when you think you know a lot
or worse—
when you think you know just a
little.

when Hugo Wolf went mad—

Hugo Wolf went mad while eating an onion and writing his 253rd song; it was rainy April and the worms came out of the ground humming *Tannhäuser,* and he spilled his milk with his ink, and his blood fell out to the walls and he howled and he roared and he screamed, and downstairs his landlady said, I *knew* it, that rotten son of a bitch has dummied up his brain, he's jacked-off his last piece of music and now I'll never get the rent, and someday he'll be famous and they'll bury him in the rain, but right now I wish he'd shut up that god damned screaming—for my money he's a silly pansy jackass and when they move him out of here, I hope they move in a good solid fisherman or a hangman or a seller of biblical tracts.

in a neighborhood of murder

murder
the roaches spit out paper clips and the helicopter circles and circles smelling for blood searchlights leering down into our bedroom
5 guys in this court have pistols another a machete we are all murderers and alcoholics but there are worse in the hotel across the street they sit in the green and white doorway banal and depraved waiting to be institutionalized
here we each have a small green plant in the window and when we fight with our women at 3 a.m.
we speak softly
and on each porch is a small dish of food always eaten by morning we presume by the
cats.

the strangest sight you ever did see—

I had this room in front on DeLongpre and I used to sit for hours in the daytime looking out the front window.
there were any number of girls who would walk by swaying;
it helped my afternoons, added something to the beer and the cigarettes.
one day I saw something extra.
I heard the sound of it first.
“come on, push!” he said.
there was a long board about 2½ feet wide and 8 feet long; nailed to the ends and in the middle were roller skates.
he was pulling in front two long ropes attached to the board and she was in back guiding and also pushing.
all their possessions were tied to the board: pots, pans, bed quilts, and so forth were roped to the board tied down; and the skate wheels were grinding.
he was white, red-necked, a southerner— thin, slumped, his pants about to fall from his ass— his face pinked by the sun and cheap wine, and she was black and walked upright pushing; she was simply beautiful in turban long green earrings yellow dress from
neck to
ankle.
her face was gloriously indifferent.
“don’t worry!” he shouted, looking back at her, “somebody will rent us a place!”
she didn’t answer.
then they were gone although I still heard the skate wheels.
they’re going to make it, I thought.
I’m sure they
did.

the 2nd novel

they'd come around and they'd ask "you finished your 2nd novel yet?"
"no."
"whatsamatta? whatsamatta that you can't finish it?"
"hemorrhoids and insomnia."
"maybe you've lost it?"
"lost what?"
"you know."
now when they come around I tell them, "yeh. I finished it. be out in Sept."
"you *finished* it?"
"yeh."
"well, listen, I gotta go."
even the cat here in the courtyard won't come to my door anymore.
it's nice.

junk

sitting in a dark bedroom with 3 junkies, female.
brown paper bags filled with trash are everywhere.
it is one-thirty in the afternoon.
they talk about mad houses, hospitals.
they are waiting for a fix.
none of them work.
it's relief and food stamps and Medi-Cal.
men are usable objects toward the fix.
it is one-thirty in the afternoon and outside small plants grow.
their children are still in school.
the females smoke cigarettes and suck listlessly on beer and tequila which I have purchased.
I sit with them.
I wait on my fix:
I am a poetry junkie.
they pulled Ezra through the streets in a wooden cage.
Blake was sure of God.
Villon was a mugger.
Lorca sucked cock.
T. S. Eliot worked a teller's cage.
most poets are swans, egrets.
I sit with 3 junkies at one-thirty in the afternoon.
the smoke pisses upward.
I wait.
death is a nothing jumbo.
one of the females says that she likes my yellow shirt.
I believe in a simple violence.
this is
some of it.

Mademoiselle from Armentières

if you gotta have wars
I suppose World War One was the best.
really, you know, both sides were much more enthusiastic, they really had something to fight for, they really thought they had something to fight for, it was bloody and wrong but it was Romantic, those dirty Germans with babies stuck on the ends of their bayonets, and so forth, and there were lots of patriotic songs, and the women loved *both* the *soldiers* and their money.
the Mexican war and those other wars hardly ever happened.
and the Civil War, that was just a movie.
the wars come too fast now
even the pro-war boys grow weary, World War Two did them in, and then Korea, that Korea, that was dirty, nobody won except the black marketeers, and BAM!—then came Vietnam, I suppose the historians will have a name and a meaning for it, but the young wised up first and now the old are getting wise, almost everybody's anti-war, no use having a war you can't win, right or wrong.
hell, I remember when I was a kid it was 10 or 15 years after World War One was over, we built model planes of Spads and Fokkers,
we bought *Flying Aces* magazine at the newsstand we knew about Baron Manfred von Richthofen and Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker and we fought in dream trenches with our dream rifles and had dream bayonet fights with the dirty Hun…
and those movies, full of drama and excitement, about good old World War One, where we almost got the Kaiser, we almost kidnapped him once, and in the end
we finished off all those spike-helmeted bastards forever.
the young kids now, they don't build model warplanes nor do they dream fight in dream rice paddies, they know it's all useless, ordinary, just a job like sweeping the streets or picking up the garbage, they'd rather go watch a Western or hang out at

the mall or go to the zoo or a football game, they’re already thinking of college and automobiles and wives and homes and barbecues, they’re already trapped in another kind of dream, another kind of war, and I guess it won’t kill them as fast, at least not physically.

it was wrong but World War One was fun for us it gave us Jean Harlow and James Cagney and “Mademoi selle from Armentières, Parley-Voo?”

it gave us

long afternoons and evenings of play (we didn’t realize that many of us were soon to die in another war) yes, they fooled us nicely but we were young and loved it— the lies of our elders— and see how it has changed— they can’t bullshit even a kid anymore,

not about all that.

now

I had boils the size of tomatoes all over me they stuck a drill into me down at the county hospital, and just as the sun went down every day there was a man in a nearby ward he'd start hollering for his friend Joe.

JOE! he'd holler, OH JOE! JOE!…!

COME GET ME, JOE!

Joe never came by.

I've never heard such mournful sounds.

Joe was probably working off a piece of ass or attempting to solve a crossword puzzle.

I've always said if you want to find out who your friends are go to a mad house or jail.

and if you want to find out where love is not be a perpetual loser.

I was very lucky with my boils being drilled and tortured against the backdrop of the Sierra Madre mountains

while that sun went down; when that sun went down I knew what *I* would do when I finally got that drill in my hands like I have it now.

society should realize…

you consult psychiatrists and philosophers when things aren't going well and whores when they are.

the whores are there for young boys and old men; to the young boys they say, "don't be frightened, honey, here I'll put it in for you."

and for the old guys they put on an act like you're really hooking it home.

society should realize the value of the whore—I mean, those girls who really enjoy their work—those who make it almost an art form.

I'm thinking of the time in a Mexican whore house this gal with her little bowl and her rag washing my dick, and it got hard and she laughed and I laughed and she kissed it, gently and slowly, then she walked over and spread out on the bed

and I got on and we worked easily, no effort, no tension, and some guy beat on the door and yelled, "Hey! what the hell's going on in there?

Hurry it up!"

but it was like a Mahler symphony—you just don't rush it.

when I finished and she came back, there was the bowl and the rag again and we both laughed; then she kissed it gently and slowly, and I got up and put my clothes back on and walked out— "Jesus, buddy, what the hell were ya doin' in there?"

"Fuckin'," I told the gentleman and walked down the hall and down the steps and stood outside in the road and lit one of those sweet Mexican cigarettes in the moonlight.

liberated and human again for a mere $3, I loved the night, Mexico and myself.

the souls of dead animals

after the slaughter house there was a bar around the corner and I sat in there and watched the sun go down through the window, a window that overlooked a lot full of tall dry weeds.
I never showered with the boys at the plant after work
so I smelled of sweat and blood.
the smell of sweat lessens after a while but the blood-smell begins to fulminate and gain power.
I smoked cigarettes and drank beer until I felt good enough to board the bus with the souls of all those dead animals riding with me; heads would turn slightly women would rise and move away from me.
when I got off the bus I only had a block to walk and one stairway up to my
room
where I'd turn on my radio and light a cigarette and nobody minded me at all.

the tragedy of the leaves

I awakened to dryness and the ferns were dead, the potted plants yellow as corn; my woman was gone and the empty bottles like bled corpses surrounded me with their uselessness; the sun was still good, though, and my landlady's note cracked in fine and undemanding yellowness; what was needed now was a good comedian, ancient style, a jester with jokes upon absurd pain; pain is absurd because it exists, nothing more; I shaved carefully with an old razor the man who had once been young and said to have genius; but that's the tragedy of the leaves, the dead ferns, the dead plants; and I walked into a dark hall where the landlady stood execrating and final, sending me to hell, waving her fat, sweaty arms and screaming screaming for rent because the world had failed us both.

the birds

the acute and terrible air hangs with murder as summer birds mingle in the branches and warble and mystify the clamor of the mind; an old parrot who never talks, sits thinking in a Chinese laundry, disgruntled forsaken
celibate;
there is red on his wing where there should be green, and between us the recognition of an immense and wasted life.
….y 2nd wife left me because I set our birds free: one yellow, with crippled wing quickly going down and to the left, cat-meat, cackling like an organ; and the other, mean green, of empty thimble head, popping up like a rocket high into the hollow sky, disappearing like sour love and yesterday’s desire and leaving me forever.
and when my wife returned that night with her bags and plans, her tricks and shining greeds, she found me glittering over a yellow feather seeking out the music which she, oddly,
failed to
hear.

the loner

16 and one-half inch neck 68 years old lifts weights body like a young boy (almost)
kept his head shaved and drank port wine from half-gallon jugs
kept the chain on the door windows boarded
you had to give a special knock to get in
he had brass knucks knives clubs
guns
he had a chest like a wrestler never lost his glasses
never swore never looked for trouble
never married after the death of his only wife
hated
cats
roaches
mice
humans
worked crossword puzzles kept up with the news
that 16 and one-half inch neck
for 68 he was something
all those boards across the windows
washed his own underwear and socks
my friend Red took me up to meet him one night
we talked a while together
then we left
Red asked, “what do you think?”
I answered, “more afraid to die than the rest of us.”
I haven’t seen either of them since.

The Genius of the Crowd

There is enough treachery, hatred, violence, Absurdity in the average human being To supply any given army on any given day.
AND The Best At Murder Are Those Who Preach Against It.
AND The Best At Hate Are Those Who Preach LOVE
AND THE BEST AT WAR
—FINALLY—ARE THOSE WHO PREACH
PEACE
Those Who Preach GOD
NEED God
Those Who Preach PEACE
Do Not Have Peace.
THOSE WHO PREACH LOVE
DO NOT HAVE LOVE
BEWARE THE PREACHERS Beware The Knowers.
Beware
Those Who
Are ALWAYS
READING
BOOKS
Beware Those Who Either Detest Poverty Or Are Proud Of It
BEWARE Those Quick To Praise For They Need PRAISE In Return
BEWARE Those Quick To Censure: They Are Afraid Of What They Do Not Know
Beware Those Who Seek Constant Crowds; They Are Nothing Alone
Beware
The Average Man The Average Woman BEWARE Their Love
Their Love Is Average, Seeks Average But There Is Genius In Their Hatred There Is Enough Genius In Their Hatred To Kill You, To Kill Anybody.

Not Wanting Solitude Not Understanding Solitude They Will Attempt To Destroy Anything That Differs From Their Own
Not Being Able To Create Art They Will Not
Understand Art
They Will Consider Their Failure As Creators Only As A Failure Of The World
Not Being Able To Love Fully They Will BELIEVE Your Love Incomplete AND THEN THEY WILL HATE
YOU
And Their Hatred Will Be Perfect Like A Shining Diamond Like A Knife Like A Mountain LIKE A TIGER
LIKE Hemlock
Their Finest
ART

German bar

I had lost the last race big somebody had stolen my coat I could feel the flu coming on and my tires were low. I went in to get a beer at the German bar but the waitress was having a fit her heart strangled by disappointment grief and loss.

women get troubled all at once, you know. I left a tip and got out.

nobody wins.

ask Caesar.

the snow of Italy

over my radio now
comes the sound of a truly mad organ, I can see some monk drunk in a cellar
mind gone or found,
talking to God in a different way; I see candles and this man has a red beard as God has a red beard; it is snowing, it is Italy, it is cold and the bread is hard and there is no butter, only wine wine in purple bottles with giraffe necks, and now the organ rises, again, he violates it, he plays it like a madman, there is blood and spit in his beard, he wants to laugh but there isn't time, the sun is going out, then his fingers slow, now there is exhaustion and the dream, yes, even holiness, man going to man,
to the mountain, the elephant, the star, and a candle falls but continues to burn upon its side, a wax puddle shining in the eyes of my red monk, there is moss on the walls and the stain of thought and failure and waiting,
then again the music comes like hungry tigers, and he laughs, it is a child's laugh, an idiot's laugh, laughing at nothing, the only laugh that understands, he holds the keys down like stopping everything and the room blooms with madness, and then he stops, stops, and sits, the candles burning, one up, one down, the snow of Italy is all that's left, it is over: the essence and the pattern.
I watch as
he pinches out the candles with his fingers, wincing near the outer edge of each eye and the room is dark as everything has always been.

for Jane: with all the love I had, which was not enough:

which was not enough: I pick up the skirt, I pick up the sparkling beads in black, this thing that moved once around flesh, and I call God a liar, I say anything that moved like that or knew
my name
could never die in the common verity of dying, and I pick up her lovely dress,
all her loveliness gone, and I speak to all the gods, Jewish gods, Christ-gods, chips of blinking things, idols, pills, bread, fathoms, risks, knowledgeable surrender, rats in the gravy of 2 gone quite mad without a chance, hummingbird knowledge, hummingbird chance, I lean upon this, I lean on all of this
and I know:
her dress upon my arm: but they will not give her back to me.

notice

the swans drown in bilge water, take down the signs, test the poisons, barricade the cow from the bull, the peony from the sun, take the lavender kisses from my night, put the symphonies out on the streets like beggars, get the nails ready, flog the backs of the saints, stun frogs and mice for the cat, burn the enthralling paintings, piss on the dawn, my love is dead.

for Jane

225 days under grass and you know more than I.
they have long taken your blood, you are a dry stick in a basket.
is this how it works?
in this room
the hours of love still make shadows.
when you left
you took almost everything.
I kneel in the nights before tigers that will not let me be.
what you were
will not happen again.
the tigers have found me and I do not care.

eulogy to a hell of a dame

dame
some dogs who sleep at night must dream of bones and I remember your bones in flesh and best
in that dark green dress and those high-heeled bright black shoes, you always cursed when you drank, your hair coming down you wanted to explode out of what was holding you: rotten memories of a rotten past, and
you finally got out by dying,
leaving me with the rotten present;
you’ve been dead 28 years yet I remember you better than any of the rest; you were the only one who understood the futility of the arrangement of
all the others were only displeased with trivial segments, carped nonsensically about nonsense; Jane, you were killed by knowing too much.
here’s a drink to your bones that this dog
still
dreams about.

barfly

Jane, who has been dead for 31 years, never could have imagined that I would write a screenplay of our drinking days together and

that it would be made into a movie and that a beautiful movie star would play her part.

I can hear Jane now: “A beautiful movie star? oh, for Christ’s sake!”

Jane, that’s show biz, so go back to sleep, dear, because no matter how hard they tried they just *couldn’t* find anybody exactly like you.

and neither can I.

was Li Po wrong?

you know what Li Po said when asked if he'd rather be an Artist or Rich?

"I'd rather be Rich," he replied, "for Artists can usually be found sitting on the doorsteps of the Rich."

I've sat on the doorsteps of some expensive and unbelievable homes myself but somehow I always managed to disgrace myself and / or insult my Rich hosts (mostly after drinking large quantities of their fine liquor).

perhaps I was afraid of the Rich?

all I knew then was poverty and the very poor, and I felt instinctively that the Rich shouldn't be so Rich, that it was some kind of clever twist of fate based on something rotten and unfair.

of course, one could say the same thing about being poor, only there were so many poor, it all seemed completely out of proportion.

and so when I, as an Artist, visited the homes of the Rich, I felt ashamed to be there, and I drank too much of their fine wines, broke their expensive glassware and antique dishes, burned cigarette holes in their Persian rugs and mauled their wives, reacting badly to the whole damned situation.

yet I had no political or social solution.

I was just a lousy house guest, I guess, and after a while I protected both myself and the Rich by rejecting their invitations and everybody felt much better after that.

I went back to

drinking alone,

breaking my own cheap glassware, filling the room with cigar smoke and feeling wonderful instead of feeling trapped, used,

pissed on,

fucked.

the night I saw George Raft in Vegas

I bet on #6, I try red, I stare at the women's legs and breasts, I wonder what Chekhov would do, and over in the corner three men with blue plates sit eating the carnage of my youth, they have beards and look very much like Russians and I pat an imaginary pistol over my left tit and try to smile like George Raft sizing up a French tart. I play the field, I pull out dollars like turnips from the good earth, the lights blaze and nobody says stop.

Hank, says my whore, for Christ's sake you're losing everything except me, and I say don't forget, baby, I'm a shipping clerk. what've I got to lose but a ball of string?

the gentlemen in the corner who look like Russians get up, knock their plates and cups on the floor and wipe their mouths on the tablecloth.

some belch (and one farts). they laugh evilly and leave without anyone bothering them. a ribbed and moiled cat comes out of somewhere, begins licking the plates on the floor and then jumps up on the table and walks around like his feet are wet.

I try black. the croupier's eyes dart like beetles. he makes futile almost habitual movements to brush them away.

I switch back to red. I look around for George Raft and spill my drink

against my chest. Hank, says my whore, let's get out of here!

well, at least,

I say, I ought to get a blow job out of this. you needn't get filthy, the whore says. I say, baby, I was born filthy. I try #14.

DEATH COMES SLOWLY LIKE ANTS TO A FALLEN FIG.

mirrors enclose us, I say to the croupier, ignoring the scenery of our despair.

I slap away a filthy thing that runs across my mouth. the cat leaps and snatches it up as it spins upon its back kicking its thousand legs.

then George Raft walks in. hello kid, he says, back again? I place my last few coins on the chest of a dead elephant.

the lightning flares, they are stabbing grapefruit in the backroom, somebody drops a glove and the place, the whole place, goes up in smoke.

we walk back to the car and fall asleep.

I am eaten by butterflies

maybe I'll win the Irish Sweepstakes maybe I'll go nuts maybe Harcourt Brace will call or maybe unemployment insurance or a rich lesbian at the top of a hill.
maybe reincarnation as a frog…
or $70,000 found floating in a plastic sack in the bathtub.
I need help I am a thin man being eaten by green trees butterflies and you.
turn turn
light the lamp my teeth ache the teeth of my soul ache I can't sleep I pray for the dead the white mice engines on fire blood on a green gown in an operating room and I am caught ow ow wild: my body being there filled with nothing but me me caught halfway between suicide and old age hustling in factories next to the young boys
keeping pace burning my blood like gasoline and making the foreman grin.
my poems are only bits of scratchings on the floor of a cage.
(uncollected)

the veryest

here comes the fishhead singing here comes the baked potato in drag here comes nothing to do all day long here comes another night of no sleep here comes the phone ringing the wrong voice here comes a termite with a banjo here comes a flagpole with blank eyes here comes a cat and a dog wearing nylons here comes a machine gun singing here comes bacon burning in the pan here comes a voice saying something dull with authority here comes a newspaper stuffed with small red birds with flat brown beaks here comes a woman carrying a torch a grenade a deathly love

here comes victory carrying one bucket of guts and one bucket of blood while stumbling over the berry bush and here comes a little lamb and here comes Mary at last and the sheet hangs out the window and the bombers head east west north south get lost get tossed like salad

all the fish in the sea line up and form one line one long line

one very long long line the veryest longest line you could ever imagine and we get lost walking past purple mountains.

we walk lost

bare at last like the knife blade or the electric shock having given

having spit it out like an unexpected olive seed as the girl at the call ser vice screams over the phone: “don’t call back! you sound like a jerk!”

(uncollected)

man mowing the lawn across the way from me

I watch you walking with your machine.
ah, you're too stupid to be cut like grass, you're too stupid to let anything violate you— the girls won't use their knives on you they don't want to their sharp edge is wasted on you, you are interested only in baseball games and western movies and grass blades.
can't you take just one of my knives?
here's an old one—stuck into me in 1955, she's dead now, it wouldn't hurt much.
I can't give you this last one— I can't pull it out yet, but here's one from 1964, how about taking this 1964 one from me?
man mowing the lawn across the way from me don't you have a knife somewhere in your gut where love left?
man mowing the lawn across the way from me don't you have a knife somewhere deep in your heart where love left?
man mowing the lawn across the way from me don't you see the young girls walking down the sidewalks now with knives in their purses?
don't you see their beautiful eyes and dresses and hair?
don't you see their beautiful asses and knees and ankles?
man mowing the lawn across the way from me is that all you see—those grass blades?
is that all you hear—the drone of the mower?
I can see all the way to Italy to Japan
to the Honduras
I can see the young girls sharpening their knives in the morning and at noon and at night, and especially at night, o, especially at night.

oh, yes

there are worse things than
being alone
but it often takes de cades
to realize this
and most often
when you do
it's too late
and there's nothing worse
than
too late.

poop

I remember, he told me, that when I was 6 or 7 years old my mother was always taking me to the doctor and saying, “he hasn’t pooped.”

she was always asking me, “have you pooped?”

it seemed to be her favorite question.

and, of course, I couldn’t lie, I had real problems pooping.

I was all knotted up inside.

my parents did that to me.

I looked at those huge beings, my father, my mother, and they seemed really stupid.

sometimes I thought they were just pretending to be stupid because nobody could really be that stupid.

but they weren’t pretending.

they had me all knotted up inside like a pretzel.

I mean, I *had* to live with them, they told me what to do and how to do it and when.

they fed, housed and clothed me.

and worst of all, there was no other place for me to go, no other choice: I had to stay with them.

I mean, I didn’t know much at that age but I could sense that they were lumps of flesh and little else.

dinnertime was the worst, a nightmare of slurps, spittle and idiotic conversation.

I looked straight down at my plate and tried to swallow my food but it all turned to glue inside.

I couldn’t digest my parents or the food.

that must have been it, for it was hell for me to poop.

“have you pooped?”

and there I’d be in the doctor’s office once again.

he had a little more sense than my parents but not much.

“well, well, my little man, so you haven’t pooped?”

he was fat with bad breath and body odor and had a pocket watch with a large gold chain that dangled across his gut.

I thought, I bet he poops a load.

and I looked at my mother.

she had large buttocks, I could picture her on the toilet, sitting there a little cross-eyed, pooping.

she was so placid, so
like a pigeon.

poopers both, I knew it in my heart.

disgusting people.

"well, little man, you just can't poop, huh?"

he made a little joke of it: he could, she could, the world could.

I couldn't.

"well, now, we're going to give you these pills.
and if they don't work, then guess what?"

I didn't answer.

"come on, little man, tell me."

all right, I decided to say it.
I wanted to get out of there:
"an enema."

"an enema," he smiled.

then he turned to my mother.

"and are you all right, dear?"

"oh, I'm fine, doctor!"

sure she was.

she pooped whenever she wanted.

then we would leave the office.

"isn't the doctor a nice man?"

no answer from me.

"isn't he?"

"yes."

but in my mind I changed it to, yes, he can poop.

he looked like a poop.

the whole world pooped while I was knotted up inside like a pretzel.

then we would walk out on the street and I would look at the people passing and all the people had behinds.

"that's all I ever noticed," he told me, "it was horrible."

“we must have had similar childhoods,” I said.
“somehow, that doesn’t help at all,”
he said.
“we’ve both got to get over this thing,” I said.
“I’m trying,” he
answered.

Phillipe’s 1950

Phillipe’s is an old time cafe off Alameda street just a little north and east of the main post office.
Phillipe’s opens at 5 a.m.
and serves a cup of coffee with cream and sugar for a nickel.
in the early mornings the bums come down off Bunker Hill, as they say, “with our butts wrapped around our ears.”
Los Angeles nights have a way of getting very cold.
“Phillipe’s,” they say, “is the only place that doesn’t hassle us.”
the waitresses are old and most of the bums are too.
come down there some early morning.
for a nickel
you can see the most beautiful faces in town.

downtown

nobody goes downtown anymore the plants and trees have been cut away around Pershing Square the grass is brown
and the street preachers are not as good as they used to be and down on Broadway the Latinos stand in long colorful lines waiting to see Latino action movies.
I walk down to Clifton's cafeteria it's still there the waterfall is still there the few white faces are old and poor dignified dressed in 1950s clothing sitting at small tables on the first floor.
I take my food upstairs to the third floor— all Latinos at the tables there faces more tired than hostile the men at rest from their factory jobs their once beautiful wives now heavy and satisfied the men wanting badly to go out and raise hell but now the money is needed for clothing, tires, toys, TV sets children's shoes, the rent.
I finish eating
walk down to the first floor and out, and nearby is a penny arcade.
I remember it from the 1940s.
I walk in.
it is full of young Latinos and Blacks between the ages of six and fifteen and they shoot machine guns play mechanical soccer and the piped-in salsa music is very loud.
they fly spacecraft test their strength fight in the ring have horse races
auto races
but none of them want their fortunes told.
I lean against a wall and watch them.
I go outside again.
I walk down and across from the *Herald-Examiner* building where my car is parked.
I get in. then I drive away.

it’s Sunday. and it’s true like they say: the old gang never goes downtown anymore.

elephants in the zoo

in the afternoon
they lean against
one another
and you can see how much
they like the sun.
(uncollected)

girl on the escalator

as I go to the escalator a young fellow and a lovely young girl are ahead of me.
her pants, her blouse are skintight.
as we ascend
she rests one foot on the step above and her behind assumes a fascinating shape.
the young man looks all around.
he appears worried.
he looks at me.
I look
away.
no, young man, I am not looking, I am not looking at your girl's behind.
don't worry, I respect her and I respect you.
in fact, I respect everything: the flowers that grow, young women, children, all the animals, our precious complicated universe, everyone and everything.
I sense that the young man now feels better and I am glad for him. I know his problem: the girl has a mother, a father, maybe a sister or brother, and undoubtedly a bunch of unfriendly relatives and she likes to dance and flirt and she likes to go to the movies and sometimes she talks and chews gum at the same time and
she enjoys really dumb TV shows and she thinks she's a budding actress and she doesn't always look so good and she has a terrible temper and sometimes she almost goes crazy and she can talk for hours on the telephone and she wants to go to Europe some summer soon and she wants you to buy her a near-new Mercedes and she's in love with Mel Gibson and her mother is a drunk and her father is a racist and sometimes when she drinks too much she snores and she's often cold in bed and she has a guru, a guy who met Christ in the desert in 1978, and she wants to be a dancer and she's unemployed and

she gets migraine headaches every time she eats sugar or cheese.

I watch him take her up the escalator, his arm protectively about her waist, thinking he's lucky, thinking he's a real special guy, thinking that nobody in the world has what he has.

and he's right, terribly terribly right, his arm around that warm bucket of
intestine,
bladder,
kidneys,
lungs,
salt,
sulphur,
carbon dioxide and
phlegm.
lotsa
luck.

the shit shits

yes, it’s dark in here.
can’t open the door.
can’t open the jam lid.
can’t find a pair of socks that match.
I was born in Andernach in 1920 and never thought it would be like this.
at the races today I was standing in the 5-win line.
this big fat guy with body odor kept jamming his binoculars into my ass and I turned and said, “pardon me, sir. could you please stop jamming those goddamned binocs into my ass?”
he just looked at me with little pig eyes— rather pink with olive pits for pupils— and the eyes just kept looking at me until I stepped away and then got sick, vomited into a trash can.
I keep getting letters from an uncle in Andernach who must be 95 years old and he keeps asking, “my boy, why don’t you WRITE?”
what can I write him? unfortunately there is nothing that I can write.
I pull on my shorts and they rip.
sleep is impossible, I mean good sleep. I just get small spurts of it, and then back to the job where the foreman comes by: “Chinaski, for a pieceworker you crawl like a snail!”
I’m sick and I’m tired and I don’t know where to go or what to do.
well, at lunchtime we all ride down the elevator together making jokes and laughing and then we sit in the employees’ cafeteria making jokes and laughing and eating the recooked food; first they buy it then they fry it then they reheat it then they sell it, can’t be a germ left in there or a vitamin either.
but we joke and laugh
otherwise we would start
screaming.

on Saturday and Sunday when I don't have money to go to the track I just lay in bed.
I never get out of bed.
I don't want to go to a movie;
it is shameful for a full-grown man to go to a movie alone.
and women are less than nothing. they terrify me.
I wonder what Andernach is like?
I think that if they would let me just stay in bed I could get well or strong or at least feel better; but it's always up and back to the machine, searching for stockings that match, shorts that won't tear, looking at my face in the mirror, disgusted with my face.
my uncle, what is he thinking with his crazy letters?
we are all little forgotten pieces of shit only we walk and talk laugh
make jokes
and
the shit shits.
some day I will tell that foreman off.
I will tell everybody off.
and walk down to the end of the road and make swans out of the blackbirds and lions out of berry leaves.
(uncollected)

big time loser

I was on the train to Del Mar and I left my seat to go to the bar car. I had a beer and came back and sat down.

"pardon me," said the lady next to me, "but you're sitting in my husband's seat."

"oh yeah?" I said. I picked up my Racing Form and began studying it. the first race looked tough. then a man was standing there. "hey, buddy, you're in my seat!"

"I already told him," said the lady, "but he didn't pay any attention."

"This is *my* seat!" I told the man.

"it's bad enough he takes my seat," said the man looking around, "but now he's reading my Racing Form!"

I looked up at him, he was puffing his chest out.

"look at you," I said, "puffing your goddamned chest out!"

"you're in my seat, buddy!" he told me.

"look," I said, "I've been in this seat since the train left the station. ask anybody!"

"no, that's not right," said a man behind me, "*he* had that seat when the train left the station!" "are you sure?"

"sure I'm sure!"

I got up and walked to the next train car.

there was my empty seat by the window and there was my Racing Form.

I went back to the other car. the man was reading his Racing Form.

"hey," I started to say…

"forget it," said the man.

"just leave us alone," said his wife.

I walked back to my car, sat down and looked out the window pretending to be interested in the land-scape, happy that the people in my car didn't know what the people in the other car knew.

commerce

I used to drive those trucks so hard and for so long that my right foot would go dead from pushing down on the accelerator.
delivery after delivery, 14 hours at a time for $1.10 per hour under the table, up one-way alleys in the worst parts of town.
at midnight or at high noon, racing between tall buildings always with the stink of something dying or about to die in the freight elevator at your destination, a self-operated elevator, opening into a large bright room, uncomfortably so under unshielded lights over the heads of many women each bent mute over a machine, crucified alive on piecework,
to hand the package then to a fat son of a bitch in red suspenders.
he signs, ripping through the cheap paper with his ballpoint pen,
that's power,
that's America at work.
you think of killing him on the spot but discard that thought and leave, down into the urine-stinking elevator, they have you crucified too, America at work, where they rip out your intestines and your brain and your will and your spirit.
they suck you dry, then throw you away.
the capitalist system.
the work ethic.
the profit motive.
the memory of your father's words, "work hard and you'll be appreciated."
of course, only if you make much more for them than they pay you.
out of the alley and into the sunlight again, into heavy traffic, planning the route to your next stop, the best way, the time-
saver,

you knowing none of the tricks and to actually think about all the deliveries that still lie ahead would lead to madness.

it's one at a time, easing in and out of traffic between other work-driven drivers also with no concept of danger, reality, flow or compassion.

you can feel the despair escaping from their machines, their lives as hopeless and as numbed as yours.

you break through the cluster of them on your way to the next stop, driving through teeming downtown Los Angeles in 1952, stinking and hungover, no time for lunch, no time for coffee, you're on route #10, a new man, give the new man the ball-busting route,

see if he can swallow the whale.

you look down and the needle is on red.

almost no gas left.

too fucking bad.

you gun it,

lighting a crushed cigarette with one hand from a soiled pack of matches.

shit on the world.

come on in!

welcome to my wormy hell.
the music grinds off-key.
fish eyes watch from the wall.
this is where the last happy shot was fired.
the mind snaps closed like a mind snapping closed.
we need to discover a new will and a new way.
we’re stuck here now listening to the laughter of the gods.
my temples ache with the fact of the facts.
I get up, move about, scratch myself.
I’m a pawn.
I am a hungry prayer.
my wormy hell welcomes you.
hello. hello there. come in, come on in!
plenty of room here for us all, sucker.
we can only blame ourselves so come sit with me in the dark.
it’s half-past nowhere
everywhere.

the bakers of 1935

my mother, father and I walked to the market once a week for our government relief food: cans of beans, cans of weenies, cans of hash, some potatoes, some eggs.
we carried the supplies in large shopping bags.
and as we left the market we always stopped outside where there was a large window where we could see the bakers kneading
the flour into the dough.
there were 5 bakers, large young men and they stood at 5 large wooden tables working very hard, not looking up.
they flipped the dough in the air and all the sizes and
designs were
different.
we were always hungry and the sight of the men working the dough, flipping it in the air was a wondrous sight, indeed.
but then, it would come time to leave and we would walk away carrying our heavy shopping bags.
"those men have jobs,"
my father would say.
he said it each time.
every time we watched the bakers he would say that.
"I think I've found a new way to make the hash,"
my mother would say each time.
or sometimes it was the weenies.
we ate the eggs all different ways: fried, poached, boiled.
one of our favorites was
poached eggs on hash.
but that favorite finally became almost impossible to eat.
and the potatoes, we fried them, baked them, boiled them.
but the potatoes had a way of not becoming as tiresome as the hash, the eggs, the beans.
one day, arriving home, we placed all our foodstuffs on the kitchen counter and stared at them.

then we turned away.
"I'm going to hold up a bank!" my father suddenly said.
"oh no, Henry, please!"
said my mother, "please don't!"
"we're going to eat some steak, we're going to eat steaks until they come out of our ears!"
"but Henry, you don't have
a gun!"
"I'll hold something in my coat, I'll pretend it's a gun!"
"I've got a water pistol,"
I said, "you can use that."
my father looked at me.
"you," he said, "SHUT UP!"
I walked outside.
I sat on the back steps.
I could hear them in there talking but I couldn't quite make it out.
then I could hear them again, it was louder.
"I'll find a new way to cook everything!"
my mother said.
"I'm going to rob a goddamned bank!" my father said.
"Henry, please, please don't!"
I heard my mother.
I got up from the steps.
walked away into the afternoon.

secret laughter

the lair of the hunted is
hidden in the last place
you'd ever look
and even if you find it
you won't believe
it's really there
in much the same way
as the average person
will not believe a great painting.

Democracy

the problem, of course, isn't the Democratic System, it's the living parts which make up the Democratic System.
the next person you pass on the street, multiply him or
her by
3 or 4 or 30 or 40 million and you will know immediately why things remain non-functional for most of us.
I wish I had a cure for the chess pieces we call Humanity…
we've undergone any number of political cures
and we all remain foolish enough to hope that the one on the way NOW
will cure almost everything.
fellow citizens, the problem never was the Democratic System, the problem is
you.

an empire of coins

the legs are gone and the hopes—the lava of outpouring, and I haven't shaved in sixteen days but the mailman still makes his rounds and water still comes out of the faucet and I have a photo of myself with glazed and milky eyes full of simple music in golden trunks and 8 oz. gloves when I made the semi-finals only to be taken out by a German brute who should have been locked in a cage for the insane and allowed to drink blood.

Now I am insane and stare at the wallpaper as one would stare at a Dalí (he has lost it) or an early Picasso, and I send the girls out for beer, the old girls who barely bother to wipe their asses and say, "well, I guess I won't comb my hair today: it might bring me luck." well, anyway, they wash the dishes and chop the wood, and the landlady keeps insisting "let me in, I can't get in, you've got the lock on, and what's all that singing and cussing in there?" but she only wants a piece of ass while she pretends she wants the rent but she's not going to get either one of 'em.

meanwhile the skulls of the dead are full of beetles and Shakespeare and old football scores like S.C. 16, N.D. 14 on a John Baker field goal.

I can see the fleet from my window, the sails and the guns, always the guns poking their eyes in the sky looking for trouble like young L.A. cops too young to shave, and the younger sailors out there sex-hungry, trying to act tough, trying to act like men but really closer to their mother's nipples than to a true evaluation of existence. I say god damn it, that my legs are gone and the outpourings too. inside my brain

they cut and snip and
pour oil
to burn and fire out early dreams.

"darling," says one of the girls, "you've got to snap out of it, we're running out of MONEY. how do you want your toast?

light or dark?"

a woman’s a woman, I say, and I put my binoculars between her kneecaps and I can see where empires have fallen.
I wish I had a brush, some paint, some paint and a brush, I say.
“why?” asks one of the
whores.
BECAUSE RATS DON’T LIKE OIL! I scream.
(I can’t go on. I don’t belong here.) I listen to radio programs and people’s voices talking and I marvel that they can get excited and interested over nothing and I flick out the lights, I crash out the lights, and I pull the shades down, I tear the shades down and I light my last cigar imagining the dreamjump off the Empire State Building into the thickheaded bullbrained mob with the hard-on attitude.
already forgotten are the dead of Normandy, Lincoln’s stringy beard, all the bulls that have died to flashing red capes, all the love that has died in real women and real men while fools have been elevated to the trumpet’s succulent sneer and I have fought red-handed and drunk
in slop-pitted alleys
the bartenders of this rotten land.
and I laugh, I can still laugh, who can’t laugh when the whole thingis so ridiculous
that only the insane, the clowns, the half-wits, the cheaters, the whores, the horse players, the bankrobbers, the poets…are interesting?
in the dark I hear the hands reaching for the last of my money like mice nibbling at paper, automatic feeders on inbred helplessness, a false drunken God asleep at the wheel…
a quarter rolls across the floor, and I remember all the faces and the football heroes, and everything has meaning, and an editor writes me, you are good but
you are too emotional
the way to whip life is to quietly frame the agony, study it and put it to sleep in the abstract.
is there anything less abstract
than dying day by day?

The door closes and the last of the great whores are gone and somehow no matter how they have killed me, they are all great, and I smoke quietly thinking of Mexico, the tired horses, of Havana and Spain and Normandy, of the jabbering insane, of my dear friends, of no more friends ever; and the voice of my Mexican buddy saying, “you won’t die

you won’t die in the war, you’re too smart, you’ll take care of yourself.”

I keep thinking of the bulls. the brave bulls dying every day.

the whores are gone. the bombing has stopped for a minute.

fuck everybody.

what?

sleepy now
at 4 a.m.
I hear the siren
of a white
ambulance,
then a dog
barks
once
in this tough-boy
Christmas
morning.

the American Flag Shirt

now more and more all these people running around wearing the American Flag Shirt and it was more or less once assumed (I think but I'm not sure) that wearing an A.F.S. meant to say you were pissing on it but now

they keep making them and everybody keeps buying them and wearing them and the faces are just like the American Flag Shirt— this one has this face and that shirt that one has that shirt and this face— and somebody's spending money and somebody's making money and as the patriots become more and more fashionable it'll be nice when everybody looks around and finds that they are all patriots now and therefore who is there left to persecute except their children?

now she’s free

Cleo’s going to make it now she’s got her shit together she split with Barney Barney wasn’t good for her she got a bigger apartment furnished it beautifully and bought a new silver Camaro she works afternoons in a dance joint drives 30 miles to the job from Redondo Beach goes to night school helps out at the AIDS clinic reads the *I Ching* does Yoga is living with a 20-year-old boy eats health food Barney wasn’t good for her she’s got her shit together now she’s into T.M.

but she’s the same old fun-loving Cleo she’s painted her nails green got a butterfly tattoo I saw her yesterday in her new silver Camaro her long blonde hair blowing in the wind.

poor Barney.

he just doesn’t know what he’s missing.

the simple truth

you just don’t know how to do it, you know that, and you can’t do a lot of other useful things either.
it’s the fault of the way you were raised, some of it, and you’ll never learn now, it’s too late.
you just can’t do certain things.
I could show you how to do them but you still wouldn’t do them right.
I learned how to do a lot of necessary things when I was a little girl and I can still do them now.
I had good parents but your parents never gave you enough attention or love so you never learned how to do certain simple things.
I know it’s not your fault but I think you should be aware of how limited you are.
here, let me do that!
now watch me!
see how easy it is!
take your time!
you have no patience!
now look at you!
you’re mad, aren’t you?
I can tell.
you think I can’t tell?
I’m going downstairs now, my favorite tv program is coming on.
and don’t be mad because I tell you the simple truth about yourself.
do you want anything from downstairs?
a snack?
no?
are you sure?

gold in your eye

I got into my BMW and drove down to my bank to pick up my American Express Gold Card.
I told the girl at the desk what I wanted.
“you’re Mr. Chinaski,” she said.
“yes, you want some i.d.?”
“oh no, we know you…”
I slipped the card into my wallet went back to parking got into the BMW (paid for, straight cash) and decided to drive down to the liquor store for a case of fine wine.
on the way, I further decided to write a poem about the whole thing: the BMW, the bank, the Gold Card just to piss off the critics the writers
the readers
who much preferred the old poems about me sleeping on park benches while
freezing and dying of cheap wine and malnutrition.
this poem is for those who think that a man can only be a creative genius at the very
edge
even though they never had the guts to try it.

a great writer

a great writer remains in bed shades down doesn't want to see anyone doesn't want to write anymore doesn't want to try anymore; the editors and publishers wonder: some say he's insane some say he's dead; his wife now answers all the mail: "….e does not wish to…"

and some others even walk up and down outside his house, look at the pulled-down shades; some even go up and ring the bell.

nobody answers.

the great writer does not want to be disturbed. perhaps the great writer is not in? perhaps the great writer has gone away?

but they all want to know the truth, to hear his voice, to be told some good reason for it all.

if he has a reason he does not reveal it.

perhaps there isn't any reason?

strange and disturbing arrangements are made; his books and paintings are quietly auctioned off; no new work has appeared now for years.

yet his public won't accept his silence— if he is dead they want to know; if he is insane they want to know; if he has a reason, please tell us!

they walk past his house write letters ring the bell

they cannot understand and will not accept the way things are.

I rather like

it.

the smoking car

they stop out front here it looks as if the car is on fire the smoke blazes blue from the hood and exhaust the motor sounds like cannon shots the car humps wildly one guy gets out,

Jesus, he says, he takes a long drink from a canvas water bag and gives the car an eerie look.

the other guy gets out and looks at the car, Jesus, he says, and he takes a drink from a pint of whiskey, then passes the bottle to his friend.

they both stand and look at the car, one holding the whiskey, the other the water bag.

they are not dressed in conventional hippie garb but in natural old clothes faded, dirty and torn.

a butterfly goes past my window and they get back in the car and it bucks off in low like a rodeo bronc

they are both laughing and one has the bottle tilted…

the butterfly is gone and outside there is a globe of smoke 40 feet in circumference.

first human beings I’ve seen in Los Angeles in 15 years.

the shoelace

a woman, a
tire that's flat, a disease, a desire; fears in front of you, fears that hold so still you can study them like pieces on a
chessboard…
it's not the large things that send a man to the mad house. death he's ready for, or murder, incest, robbery, fire, flood…
no, it's the continuing series of *small* tragedies that send a man to the mad house…
not the death of his love but a shoelace that snaps with no time left…
the dread of life
is that swarm of trivialities that can kill quicker than cancer and which are always there— license plates or taxes or expired driver's license, or hiring or firing, doing it or having it done to you, or constipation speeding tickets
rickets or crickets or mice or termites or roaches or flies or a broken hook on a screen, or out of gas
or too much gas,
the sink's stopped up, the landlord's drunk, the president doesn't care and the governor's crazy.
lightswitch broken, mattress like a porcupine; $105 for a tune-up, carburetor and fuel pump at Sears Roebuck; and the phone bill's up and the market's down and the toilet chain is broken, and the light has burned out— the hall light, the front light, the back light, the inner light; it's darker than hell and twice as
expensive.
then there's always crabs and ingrown toenails and people who insist they're your friends; there's always that and worse; leaky faucet, Christ and Christmas; blue salami, 9 day rains, 50 cent avocados and purple
liverwurst.
or making it

as a waitress at Norm's on the split shift, or as an emptier of bedpans,
or as a carwash or a busboy or a stealer of old lady's purses leaving them screaming on the sidewalks with broken arms at the age of 80.
suddenly
2 red lights in your rearview mirror and blood in your underwear;
toothache, and $979 for a bridge $300 for a gold tooth,
and China and Russia and America, and long hair and short hair and no hair, and beards and no faces, and plenty of *zigzag* but no pot, except maybe one to piss in and the other one around your gut.
with each broken shoelace out of one hundred broken shoelaces, one man, one woman, one thing enters a
mad house.
so be careful
when you
bend over.

self-inflicted wounds

he talked about Steinbeck and Thomas Wolfe and he wrote like a cross between the two of them and I lived in a hotel on Figueroa Street close to the bars and he lived further uptown in a small room and we both wanted to be writers and we'd meet at the public library, sit on the stone benches and talk about that.

he showed me his short stories and he wrote well, he wrote better than I did, there was a calm and a strength in his work that mine did not have.

my stories were jagged, harsh, with self-inflicted wounds.

I showed him all my work but he was more impressed with my drinking prowess and my worldly attitude

after talking a bit we would go to Clifton's Cafeteria for our only meal of the day (for less than a dollar in 1941)

yet

we were in great health.

we lost jobs, found jobs, lost jobs.

mostly we didn't work, we always envisioned we soon would be receiving regular checks from *The New Yorker, The Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's.*

we ran with a gang of young men who didn't envision anything at all but they had a gallant lawless charm and we drank with them and fought with them and had a hell of a wild good time.

then just like that he joined the Marine Corps.

"I want to prove something to myself" was what he told me.

he did: right after boot camp the war came and in 3 months he was dead.

and I promised myself that some day I would write a novel and that I would dedicate it to him.

I have now written 5 novels, all dedicated to others.

you know, you were right, Robert Baun, when you once told me, "Bukowski, about half of what you say is bullshit."

Verdi

and
so
we suck on a cigar and a beer attempting to mend the love wounds of the soul.
a beer.
a cigar.
I listen to Verdi scratch my hindquarters and stare out of a cloud of blue
smoke.
have you ever been to Venice?
Madrid?
the stress of continually facing the lowered horn
is wearing.
then too
I sometimes think of a less stressful kind of
love—
it can and should be so easy like falling asleep in a chair or like a church full of windows.
sad enough, I wish only for that careless love which is sweet gentle and which is now (like
this light
over my head) there only to serve me while I smoke smoke smoke out of a certain center dressed in an old brown shirt.
but I am caught under a pile of bricks; poetry is shot in the head and walks down the alley pissing on its legs.
friends, stop writing of breathing in this sky of fire.
small children, walk well behind us.
but now Verdi abides with the wallpaper with beerlove, with the taste of wet gold as my fingers dabble in ashes as strange young ladies walk outside my window dreaming of broomsticks, palaces and
blueberry pie.
(uncollected)

the young lady who lives in Canoga Park

she only fucks the ones she doesn't want to marry.
to the others she says you've got to marry me.
or maybe she just fucks the ones she wants to fuck?
she talks about it freely and lives in the apartment at the end with a 9-year-old red-haired boy and a 7-month-old baby.
she gets child support and when she works she works in the factories or as a cocktail waitress.
she has a boyfriend 60 years old who drinks a jug of wine a day has a bad leg and lives at the YMCA.
she smokes dope, mostly grass, takes pills wears large dark glasses and talks talks talks while not looking at you and twisting a long beaded necklace with her thin nervous fingers.
she has a neck like a swan, could be a movie star, twice in the mad house, a mother in the mad house, and a sister in prison.
you never know when she is going to
go mad again and
throw tiny fits
and 3 a.m. phone calls at you.
the kids trundle about the apartment and she fucks and doesn't fuck, has an exercise chart on her wall bends this way and that touches her toes leaps
stretches and so
forth. she goes from dope to religion and from religion back to dope and from black guys to white guys and from white to black again.
when she takes off those dark glasses her eyes are blue and she tries to smile as she twists that necklace around and around.
there are 3 keys on the end of it: her car key her apartment key
and one that I've never asked her about.
she's not given up,
she's not dead yet,
she's hardly even old, her air conditioner doesn't

work and that's really all I know about her because I'm one of those she wants to marry.

(uncollected)

life of the king

I awaken at 11:30 a.m.

get into my chinos and a clean green shirt open a Miller's, and nothing in the mailbox but the *Berkeley Tribe* which I don't subscribe to, and on KUSC there is organ music something by Bach and I leave the door open stand on the porch walk out front hot damn

that air is good and the sun like golden butter on my body. no racetrack today, nothing but this beastly and magic leisure, rolled cigarette dangling I scratch my belly in the sun as Paul Hindemith rides by on a bicycle, and down the street a lady in a very red dress bends down into a laundry basket rises hangs a sheet on a line, bends again, rises, in all that red, that red like snake skin clinging moving flashing hot damn I keep looking, and she sees me pauses bent over basket

clothespin in mouth she rises with a pair of pink pan ties smiles around the clothespin waves to me.

what's next? rape in the streets?

I wave back,

go in,

sit down at the machine by the window, and now it's someone's violin concerto in D, and a pretty black girl in very tight pants walking a hound, they stop outside my window, look in; she has on dark shades and her mouth opens a little, then she and the dog move on.

someone might have bombed cities for this or sold apples in the rain.

but whoever is responsible, today I wish to thank him all the way.

my failure

I think of devils in hell and stare at a beautiful vase of flowers as the woman in my bedroom angrily switches the light on and off.
we have had a very bad argument and I sit in here smoking cigarettes from India as on the radio an opera singer’s prayers are not in my language.
outside, the window to my left reveals the night lights of the city and I only wish I had the courage to break through this simple horror and make things well again but my petty anger prevents
me.
I realize hell is only what we create, smoking these cigarettes, waiting here,
wondering here, while in the other room she continues to sit and switch the light on and off, on and off.

a boy and his dog

there's Barry in his ripped walking shorts he's on Thorazine is 24
looks 38
lives with his mother in the same apartment building and they fight like married folk.
he wears dirty white t-shirts and every time he gets a new dog he names him "Brownie."
he's like an old woman really.
he'll see me getting into my Volks.
"hey, ya goin' ta work?"
"oh, no Barry, I don't work. I'm going to the racetrack."
"yeah?"
he walks over to the car window.
"ya heard them last night?"
"who?"
"them! they were playin' that shit all night!
I couldn't sleep! they played until one-thirty!
didn't cha hear 'em?"
"no, but I'm in the back, Barry, you're up front."
we live in east Hollywood among the massage parlors, adult bookstores and the sex film theatres.
"yeah," says Barry. "I don't know what this neighborhood is comin' to! ya know those other people in the front unit?"
"yes."
"well, I saw through their curtains! and ya know what they were doin'?"
"no, Barry."
"this!" he says and then takes his right forefinger and pokes it against a vein in his left arm.
"really?"
"yeah! and if it ain't *that,* now we got all these drunks in the neighborhood!"
"look, Barry, I've got to get to the racetrack."

"aw' right. but ya know what happened?"

"no, Barry."

"a cop stopped me on my Moped. and guess why?"

"speeding?"

"no! he claimed I had to have a license to drive a Moped!

that's stupid! he gave me a ticket! I almost smashed him in the face!"

"oh yeah?"

"yeah! I almost smashed him!"

"Barry, I've got to make the first race."

"how much does it cost you to get in?"

"four dollars and twenty-five cents."

"I got into the Pomona County Fair for a dollar."

"all right, Barry."

the motor has been running. I put it into first and pull out. in the rearview mirror I see him walk back across the lawn.

Brownie is waiting for him, wagging his tail.

his mother is inside waiting.

maybe Barry will slam her against the refrigerator thinking about that cop.

or maybe they'll play checkers.

I find the Hollywood freeway then the Pasadena freeway.

life has been tough on Barry: he's 24

looks 38

but it all evens out finally: he's aged a good many other people too.

liberated woman and liberated man

look there.
the one you considered killing yourself for.
you saw her the other day getting out of her car in the Safeway parking lot.
she was wearing a torn green dress and old dirty boots her face raw with living.
she saw you
so you walked over and spoke and then listened.
her hair did not glisten her eyes and her conversation were dull.
where was she?
where had she gone?
the one you were going to kill yourself for?
the conversation finished she walked into the store and you looked at her automobile and even that which used to drive up and park in front of your door with such verve and in a spirit of adventure now looked
like a junkyard
joke.
you decide not to shop at Safeway you'll drive 6 blocks east and buy what you need at Ralphs.
getting into your car you are quite pleased that you didn't kill yourself;
everything is delightful and the air is clear.
your hands on the wheel, you grin as you check for traffic in the rearview mirror.
my man, you think, you've saved yourself for somebody else, but who?
a slim young creature walks by in a mini skirt and sandals showing a marvelous leg.
she's going in to shop at Safeway too.
you turn off the engine and follow her in.

small talk

all right, while we are gently celebrating to night and while crazy classical music leaps at me from my small radio, I light a fresh cigar and realize that I am still very much alive and that the 21st century is almost upon me!

I walk softly now toward 5 a.m. this dark night.

my 5 cats have been in and out, looking after me, I have petted them, spoken to them, they are full of their own private fears wrought by previous centuries of cruelty and abuse but I think that they love me as much as they can, anyhow, what I am trying to say here is that writing is just as exciting and mad and just as big a gamble for me as it ever was, because Death after all these years walks around in the room with me now and speaks softly, asking, do you still think that you are a genuine writer? are you pleased with what you've done?

listen, let me have one of those cigars.

help yourself, motherfucker, I say.

Death lights up and we sit quietly for a time.

I can feel him here with me.

don't you long for the ferocity of youth? He finally asks.

not so much, I say.

but don't you regret those things that have been lost?

not at all, I say.

don't you miss, He asks slyly, the young girls climbing through your window?

all they brought was bad news, I tell him.

but the *illusion,* He says, don't you miss the *illusion*?

hell yes, don't you? I ask.

I have no illusions, He says sadly.

sorry, I forgot about that, I say, then walk to the window unafraid and strangely satisfied to watch the warm dawn unfold.

the crunch

too much
too little
too fat
too thin
or nobody.
laughter or
tears
haters
lovers
strangers with faces like the backs of thumb tacks
armies running through streets of blood waving winebottles bayoneting and fucking virgins.
or an old guy in a cheap room with a photograph of M. Monroe.
there is a loneliness in this world so great that you can see it in the slow movement of the hands of a clock.
people so tired
mutilated
either by love or no love.
people just are not good to each other one on one
the rich are not good to the rich the poor are not good to the poor.
we are afraid.
our educational system tells us that we can all be big-ass winners.
it hasn't told us about the gutters or the suicides.
or the terror of one person aching in one place alone
untouched
unspoken to
watering a plant.
people are not good to each other.
people are not good to each other.
people are not good to each other.

I suppose they never will be.
I don’t ask them to be.
but sometimes I think about it.
the beads will swing the clouds will cloud and the killer will behead the child like taking a bite out of an ice cream cone.
too much
too little
too fat
too thin
or nobody
more haters than lovers.
people are not good to each other.
perhaps if they were our deaths would not be so sad.
meanwhile I look at young girls stems flowers of chance.
there must be a way.
surely there must be a way we have not yet thought of.
who put this brain inside of me?
it cries
it demands
it says that there is a chance.
it will not say
“no.”

funhouse

I drive to the beach at night in the winter and sit and look at the burned-down amusement pier wonder why they just let it sit there in the water.
I want it out of there, blown up, vanished, erased;
that pier should no longer sit there with madmen sleeping inside the burned-out guts of the fun house…
it’s awful, I say, blow the damn thing up, get it out of my eyes, that tombstone in the sea.
the madmen can find other holes to crawl into.
I used to walk that pier when I was 8
years old.

the poetry reading

at high noon
at a small college near the beach sober the sweat running down my arms a spot of sweat on the table I flatten it with my finger blood money blood money my god they must think I love this like the others but it's for bread and beer and rent blood money I'm tense lousy feel bad poor people I'm failing I'm failing
a woman gets up walks out slams the door
a dirty poem
somebody told me not to read dirty poems here
it's too late.
my eyes can't see some lines I read it out— desperate trembling lousy
they can't hear my voice and I say,
I quit, that's it, I'm finished.
and later in my room there's scotch and beer: the blood of a coward.
this then
will be my destiny: scrabbling for pennies in dark tiny halls reading poems I have long since become tired of.
and I used to think that men who drove buses or cleaned out latrines or murdered men in alleys were fools.

somebody

god I got the sad blue blues, this woman sat there and she said are you really Charles Bukowski?
and I said
forget that
I do not feel good I’ve got the sad sads all I want to do is fuck you
and she laughed she thought I was being clever and…ust looked up her long slim legs of heaven I saw her liver and her quivering intestine I saw Christ in there jumping to a folk-rock
all the long lines of starvation within me rose and I walked over and grabbed her on the couch ripped her dress up around her face
and I didn’t care rape or the end of the earth one more time to be there anywhere
real
yes
her pan ties were on the floor and my cock went in my cock my god my cock went in
I was Charles Somebody.

the colored birds

it is a highrise apt. next door and he beats her at night and she screams and nobody stops it and I see her the next day standing in the driveway with curlers in her hair and she has her huge buttocks jammed into black slacks and she says, standing in the sun, “god damn it, 24 hours a day in this place, I never go anywhere!”

then he comes out, proud, the little matador, a pail of shit, his belly hanging over his bathing trunks— he might have been a handsome man once, might have, now they both stand there and he says, “I think I’m goin’ for a swim.”

she doesn’t answer and he goes to the pool and jumps into the fishless, sandless water, the peroxide-codeine water, and I stand by the kitchen window drinking coffee trying to unboil the fuzzy, stinking picture— after all, you can’t live elbow to elbow to people without wanting to draw a number on them.

every time my toilet flushes they can hear it. every time they go to bed I can hear them.

soon she goes inside and then comes out with 2 colored birds in a cage. I don’t know what they are. they don’t talk. they just move a little, seeming to twitch their tail-feathers and shit. that’s all they do.

she stands there looking at them.

he comes out: the little tuna, the little matador, out of the pool, a dripping unbeautiful white, the cloth of his wet suit gripping.

“get those birds in the house!”

“but the birds need sun!”

“I said, get those birds in the house!”

“the birds are gonna die!”

“you listen to me, I said, GET THOSE BIRDS IN THE HOUSE!”

she bends and lifts them, her huge buttocks in the black slacks looking so sad.

he slams the door behind them. then I hear it.

BAM!
she screams
BAM! BAM!
she screams
then: BAM!
and she screams.

I pour another coffee and decide that that’s a new one: he usually only beats her at night. it takes a man to beat his wife night and day. although he doesn’t look like much he’s one of the few real men around here.

poem for personnel managers:

An old man asked me for a cigarette and I carefully dealt out two.
"Been lookin' for job. Gonna stand in the sun and smoke."
He was close to rags and rage and he leaned against death.
It was a cold day, indeed, and trucks loaded and heavy as old whores banged and tangled on the streets…
We drop like planks from a rotting floor as the world strives to unlock the bone that weights its brain.
(God is a lonely place without steak.)
We are dying birds
we are sinking ships— the world rocks down against us and we throw out our arms
and we
throw out our legs
like the death kiss of the centipede: but they kindly snap our backs and call our poison "politics."
Well, we smoked, he and I—little men nibbling fish-head thoughts…
All the horses do not come in, and as you watch the lights of the jails
and hospitals wink on and out, and men handle flags as carefully as babies, remember this:
you are a great-gutted instrument of heart and belly, carefully planned— so if you take a plane for Savannah, take the best plane; or if you eat chicken on a rock, make it a very special animal.
(You call it a bird; I call birds flowers.)
And if you decide to kill somebody, make it anybody and not somebody: some men are made of more special, precious parts: do not kill if you will
a president or a King or a man
behind a desk—
these have heavenly longitudes enlightened attitudes.

If you decide,

take us

who stand and smoke and glower; we are rusty with sadness and feverish with climbing broken ladders.

Take us:

we were never children like your children.

We do not understand love songs like your inamorata.

Our faces are cracked linoleum, cracked through with the heavy, sure feet of our masters.

We are shot through with carrot tops and poppyseed and tilted grammar; we waste days like mad blackbirds and pray for alcoholic nights.

Our silk-sick human smiles wrap around us like somebody else's confetti: we do not even belong to the Party.

We are a scene chalked-out with the sick white brush of Age.

We smoke, asleep as a dish of figs.

We smoke, dead as a fog.

Take us.

A bathtub murder

or something quick and bright; our names in the papers.

Known, at last, for a moment to millions of careless and grape-dull eyes

that hold themselves private to only flicker and flame at the poor cracker-barrel jibes of their conceited, pampered correct comedians.

Known, at last, for a moment, as they will be known and as you will be known by an all-gray man on an all-gray horse who sits and fondles a sword longer than the night longer than the mountain's aching backbone longer than all the cries that have a-bombed up out of throats and exploded in a newer, less-planned land.

We smoke and the clouds do not notice us.

A cat walks by and shakes Shakespeare off of his back.

Tallow, tallow, candle like wax: our spines are limp and our consciousness burns guilelessly away the remaining wick life has doled out to us.

An old man asked me for a cigarette and told me his troubles
and this is what he said:
that Age was a crime
and that Pity picked up the marbles
and that Hatred picked up the cash.
He might have been your father or mine.
He might have been a sex-fiend or a saint.
But what ever he was, he was condemned
and we stood in the sun and smoked
and looked around
in our leisure
to see who was next in line.

my fate

like the fox
I run with the hunted
and if I’m not
the happiest man
on earth
I’m surely the
luckiest man
alive.
(uncollected)

my atomic stockpile

I cleaned my place the other day first time in ten years and found 100 rejected poems: I fastened them all to a clipboard (much bad reading).

now I will clean their teeth fill their cavities give them eye and ear examinations weigh them offer blood transfusions then send them out again into the sick world of posey.

either that

or I must burn down your cities, rape your women, murder your men,

enslave your children.

every time I clean my room the world trembles in the balance.

that’s why I only do it once every ten years.

(uncollected)

Bruckner (2)

Bruckner wasn’t bad even though he got down on his knees and proclaimed Wagner the master.

it saddens me, I guess, in a small way because while Wagner was hitting all those homers Bruckner was sacrificing the runners to second and he knew it.

and I know that mixing baseball metaphors with classical music will not please the purists either.

I prefer Ruth to most of his teammates but I appreciate those others who did the best they could and kept on doing it even when they knew they were second best.

this is your club fighter your back-up quarterback the unknown jock who sometimes brings one in at 40-to-one.

this was Bruckner.

there are times when we should remember the strange courage of the second-rate who refuse to quit when the nights are black and long and sleepless and the days are without end.

hello, how are you?

this fear of being what they are: dead.

at least they are not out on the street, they are careful to stay indoors, those pasty mad who sit alone before their TV sets, their lives full of canned, mutilated laughter.

their ideal neighborhood of parked cars of little green lawns of little homes the little doors that open and close as their relatives visit throughout the holidays the doors closing behind the dying who die so slowly behind the dead who are still alive in your quiet average neighborhood of winding streets of agony of confusion of horror of fear

of ignorance.

a dog standing behind a fence.

a man silent at the window.

vacancy

sun-stroked women without men
on a Santa Monica Monday; the men are working or in jail or insane; one girl floats in a rubber suit, waiting…
houses slide off the edges of cliffs and down into the sea.
the bars are empty the lobster eating houses are empty; it's a recession, they say, the good days are over.
you can't tell an unemployed man from an artist any more, they all look alike and the women look the same, only a little more desperate.
we stop at a hippie hole in Topanga Canyon…
and wait, wait, wait; the whole area of the canyon and the beach is listless useless
VACANCY, it says, PEOPLE WANTED.
the wood has no fire the sea is dirty the hills are dry
the temples have no bells love has no bed
sun-stroked women without men
one sailboat
life drowned.

batting slump

the sun slides down through the shades.
I have a pair of black shoes and a pair of brown shoes.
I can hardly remember the girls of my youth.
there is numb blood pulsing through the falcon and the hyena and the pimp and there's no escaping this unreasonable sorrow.
there's crabgrass and razor wire and the snoring of my cat.
there are lifeguards sitting in canvas-back chairs with salt rotting under their toenails.
there's the hunter with eyes like rose petals.
sorrow, yes, it pulls at me I don't know why.
avenues of despair slide into my ears.
the worms won't sing.
the Babe swings again missing a 3-and-2 pitch twisting around himself leaning over his whiskey gut.
cows give milk
dentists pull teeth thermometers work.
I can sing the blues it doesn't cost a dime and when I lay down to night pull up the covers there's the dark factor
there's the unknown factor there's this manufactured staggering black
empty
space.
I got to hit one out of here pretty soon.

bang bang

absolutely sesamoid said the skeleton shoving his chalky foot upon my desk, and that was it, bang bang,

he looked at me, and it was my bone body and I was what remained, and there was a newspaper on my desk and somebody folded the newspaper and I folded, I was the newspaper under somebody's arm and the sheet of me had eyes and I saw the skeleton watching

and just before the door closed I saw a man who looked partly like Napoleon, partly like Hitler, fighting with my skeleton, then the door closed and we went down the steps and outside and I was under the arm

of a fat little man who knew nothing and I hated him

for his indifference to fact, how I hated him as he unfolded me in the subway and I fell against the back of an old woman.

the pleasures of the damned

the pleasures of the damned are limited to brief moments of happiness: like the eyes in the look of a dog, like a square of wax, like a fire taking the city hall, the county, the continent,

like fire taking the hair of maidens and monsters; and hawks buzzing in peach trees, the sea running between their claws, Time drunk and damp, everything burning, everything wet, everything fine.

one more good one

to be writing poetry at the age of 50
like a schoolboy,
surely, I must be crazy; racetracks and booze and arguments with the landlord; watercolor paintings under the bed with dirty socks; a bathtub full of trash and a garbage can lined with underground newspapers; a record player that doesn’t work, a radio that doesn’t work, and I don’t work— I sit between 2 lamps, bottle on the floor begging a 20-year-old typewriter to say something, in a way and well enough so they won’t confuse me with the more comfortable practitioners; this is certainly not a game for flyweights or Ping-Pong players— all arguments to the contrary.
—but once you get the taste, it’s good to get your teeth into words. I forgive those who can’t quit.
I forgive myself.
this is where the action is, this is the hot horse that
comes in.
there’s no grander fort no better flag no better woman
no better way; yet there’s much else to say— there seems as much hell in it as magic; death gets as close as any lover has, closer, you know it like your right hand like a mark on the wall like your daughter’s name, you know it like the face on the corner newsboy, and you sit there with flowers and houses with dogs and death and a boil on the neck, you sit down and do it again and again the machinegun chattering by the window as the people walk by as you sit in your undershirt, 50, on an indelicate March evening, as their faces look in and help you write the next 5
lines,
as they walk by and say, “the old man in the window, what’s the deal with him?”
—fucked by the muse, friends, thank you— and I roll a cigarette with one hand like the old bum I am, and then thank

and curse the gods alike, lean forward
  drag on the cigarette think of the good fighters like poor Hem,
poor Beau Jack, poor Sugar Ray, poor Kid Gavilan, poor Villon,
poor Babe, poor Hart Crane, poor me, hahaha.
  I lean forward,
  redhot ash
  falling on my wrists, teeth into the word.
  crazy at the age of 50, I send it home.

the little girls hissed

since my last name was Fuch, he said to Raymond, you can believe the school yard was tough: they put itching powder down my neck, threw gravel at me, stung me with rubber bands in class, and outside they called me names, well, one name mainly, over and over, and on top of all that my parents were poor, I wore cardboard in my shoes to fill in the holes in the soles, my pants were patched, my shirts threadbare; and even my teachers ganged up on me, they slammed my palm with rulers and sent me to the principal's office as if I was really guilty of something; and, of course, the abuse kept coming from my classmates; I was stoned, beaten, pissed on; the little girls hissed and stuck their tongues out at me…

Fuch's wife smiled sadly at Raymond: my poor darling husband had such a *terrible* childhood!

(she was so beautiful it almost stunned one to look at her.)

Fuch looked at Raymond: hey, your glass is empty.

yeah, said Raymond.

Fuch touched a button and the English butler silently glided in. he nodded respectfully to Raymond and in his beautiful accent asked, another drink, sir?

yes, please, Raymond answered.

the butler went off to prepare the drink.

what hurt most, of course, continued Fuch, was the name calling.

Raymond asked, have you never forgotten it?

I did for a while, but then strangely I began to miss the abuse…

the butler returned carrying Raymond's drink on a silver tray.

here is your drink, sir, said the butler.

thank you, said Raymond, taking it off the tray.

o.k., Paul, Fuch said to the butler, you can start now.

now? asked the butler.

now, came the answer.

the butler stood in front of Fuch and screamed: fucky-boy! fucky-baby! fuck-face! fuck-brain!

where did your name come from, fuck-head?

how come you’re such a fuck-up?

etc.…

they all started laughing uncontrollably as the butler delivered his tirade in that beautiful British accent.

they couldn’t stop laughing, they fell out of their chairs and got down on the rug, pounding it and laughing, Fuch, his lovely young wife and Raymond in that sprawling mansion overlooking the shining sea.

ha ha ha ha ha, ha ha

monkey feet

small and blue walking toward you as the back of a building falls off and an airplane chews the white sky, doom is like the handle of a pot, it's there, know it,

have ice in your tea, marry, have children, visit your dentist, do not scream at night even if you feel like screaming, count ten make love to your wife, or if your wife isn't there if there isn't anybody there count 20, get up and walk to the kitchen if you have a kitchen and sit there sweating at 3 a.m. in the morning monkey feet small and blue walking toward you.

thoughts from a stone bench in Venice

I sit on this bench and look at the sea and the freaks and the lovers.

I need new eyes a new mouth new pillows, a new woman.

every old stud with half an eye in his head loves to charm and ride a new young calf.

when I think of womenless men mowing their Saturday lawns and playing football, baseball, basketball with their sons I feel like vomiting into the far horizon.

the family stinks of Christ and the American Stock Exchange.

the family stinks of safety and numbness and Thanksgiving turkeys.

the family stinks of airless packed automobiles driving through redwood forests.

I need new eyes a new woman new ankles a new voice new betrayals.

I don't want a long funeral pro cession when I die.

I want to move on without weight or obligation.

I want just the sullen darkness I want a tomb like this night now: me here undiluted— solid, cranky, immaculate.

I hold fast to me. that's all there is.

(uncollected)

scene in a tent outside the cotton fields of Bakersfield:

we fought for 17 days inside that tent thrusting and counter-thrusting but finally she got away and I walked outside and spit in the dirty sand.
Abdullah, I said, why don't you wash your shorts? you've been wearing the same shorts
for 17 years.
Effendi, he said, it's the sun, the sun cleans everything. what went with the girl?
I don't know if I couldn't please her or if I couldn't
catch her. she was pretty young.
what did she cost, Effendi?
17 camel.
he whistled through his broken teeth. aren't you going to catch her?
howinthehell how? can I get my camels back?
you are an American, he said.
I walked into the tent fell upon the ground and held my head within
my hands.
suddenly she burst within the tent laughing madly,
Americano, Americano!
please
go away
I said quietly.
men are, she said sitting down and rolling down her stockings, some parts titty and some parts tiger. you don't mind if I roll down my stockings?
I don't mind, I said, if you roll down the top of your dress. whores are
always rolling down their hose. please go away. I read where the cruiser crew passed the helmet for the red cross; I think I'll have them pass it to brace your flabby butt.

have ’em pass the helmet twice, dad, she said, howcum you don’t love me no more?

I been thinking, I said, how can Love have a urinary tract and distended bowels?

pack up, daughter, and flow, maneuver out of the mansions of my sight!

you forget, daddy-o, we’re in *my* tent!

oh, Christ, I said, the trivialities of private ownership! where’s my hat?

you were wearing a towel, dad, but kiss me, daddy, hold me in your arms!

I walked over and mauled her breasts.

I drink too much beer, she said, I can’t help it if I piss.

we fucked for 17 days.

3:16 and one half…

here I'm supposed to be a great poet and I'm sleepy in the afternoon here I am aware of death like a giant bull charging at me

and I'm sleepy in the afternoon here I'm aware of wars and men fighting in the ring and I'm aware of good food and wine and good women and I'm sleepy in the afternoon I'm aware of a woman's love

and I'm sleepy in the afternoon, I lean into the sunlight behind a yellow curtain I wonder where the summer flies have gone I remember the most bloody death of Hemingway and I'm sleepy in the afternoon.

some day I won't be sleepy in the afternoon some day I'll write a poem that will bring volcanoes to the hills out there

but right now I'm sleepy in the afternoon and somebody asks me, "Bukowski, what time is it?"

and I say, "3:16 and a half."

I feel very guilty, I feel obnoxious, useless, demented, I feel

sleepy in the afternoon,

they are bombing churches, o.k., that's o.k., the children ride ponies in the park, o.k., that's o.k., the libraries are filled with thousands of books of knowledge, great music sits inside the nearby radio and I am sleepy in the afternoon, I have this tomb within myself that says, ah, let the others do it, let them win,

let me sleep,

wisdom is in the dark

sweeping through the dark like brooms, I'm going where the summer flies have gone, try to catch me.

a literary discussion

Markov claims I am trying to stab his soul but I'd prefer his wife.
I put my feet on the coffee table and he says, I don't mind you putting your feet on the coffee table except that the legs are wobbly and the thing will fall apart
any minute.
I leave my feet on the table but I'd prefer his wife.
I would rather, says Markov, entertain a ditchdigger or a news vendor because they are kind enough to observe the decencies even though they don't know
Rimbaud from rat poison.
my empty beercan
rolls to the floor.
that I must die
bothers me less than a straw, says Markov, my part of the game
is that I must live the best I can.
I grab his wife as she walks by, and then her can is against my belly, and she has fine knees and breasts and I kiss her.
it is not so bad, being old, he says, a calmness sets in, but here's the catch: to keep calmness and deadness separate; never to look upon youth as inferior because you are old, never to look upon age as wisdom because you have experience. a man can be old and a fool— many are, a man can be young and wise— few are. a—
for Christ's all sake, I wailed, shut up!
he walked over and got his cane and walked out.
you've hurt his feelings, she said, he thinks you are a great poet.
he's too slick for me, I said, he's too wise.
I had one of her breasts out.
it was a monstrous beautiful thing.

butterflies

I believe in earning one's own way but I also believe in the unexpected gift and it is a wondrous thing when a woman who has read your works (or parts of them, anyhow) offers her self to you out of the blue a total stranger.
such an offer such a communion must be taken as holy.
the hands the fingers the hair the smell the light.
one would like to be strong enough to turn them away
those butterflies.
I believe in earning one's own way but I also believe in the unexpected gift.
I have no shame.
we deserve one another
those butterflies who flutter to my tiny flame and
me.

the great escape

listen, he said, you ever seen a bunch of crabs in a bucket?
no, I told him.
well, what happens is that now and then one crab will climb up on top of the others and begin to climb toward the top of the bucket, then, just as he’s about to escape another crab grabs him and pulls him back down.
really? I asked.
really, he said, and this job is just like that, none of the others want anybody to get out of here. that’s just the way it is in the postal ser vice!
I believe you, I said.
just then the supervisor walked up and said, you fellows were talking.
there is no talking allowed on this job.
I had been there eleven and one-half years.
I got up off my stool and climbed right up the supervisor and then I reached up and pulled myself right out of there.
it was so easy it was unbelievable.
but none of the others followed me.
and after that, whenever I had crab legs I thought about that place.
I must have thought about that place maybe 5 or 6 times
before I switched to lobster.

my friend William

my friend William is a fortunate man: he lacks the imagination to suffer
he kept his first job his first wife
can drive a car 50,000 miles without a brake job
he dances like a swan and has the prettiest blankest eyes this side of El Paso
his garden is a paradise the heels of his shoes are always level and his handshake is firm
people love him
when my friend William dies it will hardly be from madness or cancer
he'll walk right past the de vil and into heaven
you'll see him at the party to night grinning over his martini
blissful and delightful as some guy fucks his wife in the bathroom.

safe

the house next door makes me sad.
both man and wife rise early and go to work.
they arrive home in early evening.
they have a young boy and a girl.
by 9 p.m. all the lights in the house are out.
the next morning both man and wife rise early again and go to work.
they return in early evening.
by 9 p.m. all the lights are out.
the house next door makes me sad.
the people are nice people, I like them.
but I feel them drowning.
and I can’t save them.
they are surviving.
they are not
homeless.
but the price is terrible.
sometimes during the day I will look at the house
and the house will look at me and the house will weep, yes, it does, I feel it.
the house is sad for the people living there and I am too
and we look at each other and cars go up and down the street, boats cross the harbor and the tall palms poke at the sky and to night at 9 p.m.
the lights will go out, and not only in that house and not only in this city.
safe lives hiding, almost stopped,
the breathing of bodies and little else.

starve, go mad, or kill yourself

I'm not going to die easy;
I've sat on your suicide beds in some of the worst holes in America,
penniless and mad I've been, I mean, insane, you know; big tears, each one the size of your bastard hearts, flowing down, roaches crawling into my shoes, one dirty 40-watt lightbulb overhead and a room that smelled like piss; while your rich your falsely famous laughed in safe stale places far away, you gave me a suicide bed and two choices, no three: starve, go mad, or kill yourself.
for now enjoy your trips to Paris where you consort with great painters and dupes, but I am getting ready for your eyes and your brain and your dirty dishwater souls; you men who have created a pigpen for millions to choke soundlessly in— from India to Los Angeles from Paris to the tits of the Nile— you're fucked up you rich you warty you insecure you pricky damned imbecile pasty white idiots with your starched shirts and your starched wives and, yes yes,
your starched lives, get away get away
get away
go to Paris
while you can
while I let you.
the jolly damned man with the hoe (see Markham) didn't answer the call, but your children will be raped and your pigs will be eaten and the skies will burn black with crows and your cries, as you answer for centuries of unbearable indignity and bullshit.
you will be dealt with we know you now
we've known you forever; the might of the timorous flies forth like a tremendous and ever beautiful swan, no shit, friend, look up look up look up look up the jolly damned man with the hoe is now flying over Milwaukee grinning more

lovely than the sun more graceful than all the ugly wounds more real than you or I or anything.

(uncollected)

the beautiful lady

we are gathered here now to bury her in this poem.
she did not marry an unemployed wino who beat her every night.
her several children will never wear snot-stained shirts or torn dresses.
the beautiful lady simply calmly
died.
and may the clean dirt of this poem bury her.
her and her womb and her jewels and her combs and her poems
and her pale blue eyes and her grinning rich
frightened husband.

my life as a sitcom

stepped into the wrong end of the Jacuzzi and twisted my right leg which was bad to begin with, then that night got drunk with a tv writer and an actor, something about using my life to make a sitcom and luckily that fell through and the next day at the track I get a box seat in the dining area, get a menu and a glass of water, my leg is really paining me, I can barely walk to the betting window and back, then about the 3rd race the waiter rushes by, asks, “can I borrow your menu?” but he doesn’t wait for an answer, he just grabs it and runs off.

a couple of races go by, I fight through my pain and continue to make my bets, get back, sit down just as the waiter rushes by again.

he grabs all my silverware and my napkin and runs off.

“HEY!” I yell but he’s gone.

all around me people are eating, drinking and laughing.

I check my watch after the 6th race and it is 4:30 p.m.

I haven’t been served yet and I’m 72 years old with a hangover and a leg from hell.

I pull myself to my feet by the edge of the table and manage to hobble about looking for the maitre d’. I see him down a far aisle and wave him in.

“can I speak to you?” I ask.

“certainly, sir!”

“look, it’s the 7th race, they took my menu and my silverware and I haven’t been served yet.”

“we’ll take care of it right away, sir!”

well, the 7th race went, the 8th race went, and still no ser vice.

I purchase my ticket for the 9th race and take the escalator down.

on the first floor, I purchase a sandwich.

I eat it going down another escalator to the parking lot.

the valet laughs as I slowly work my leg into the car, making a face of pain as I do so.

"got a gimpy leg there, huh, Hank?" he asks.

I pull out, make it to the boulevard and onto the freeway which immediately begins to slow down because of a 3-car crash ahead.

I snap on the radio in time to find that my horse has run out in the 9th.

a flash of pain shoots up my right leg.

I decide to tell my wife about my misfortunes at the track even though I know she will respond by telling me that everything as always was completely my fault but when a man is in pain he can't think right, he only asks for more.

and

gets it.

who needs it?

see this poem?
it was
written without drinking.
I don’t need to drink to write.
I can write without drinking.
my wife says I can.
I say that maybe I can.
I’m not drinking and I’m writing.
see this poem?
it was
written without drinking.
who needs a drink now?
probably the reader.

riots

I’ve watched this city burn twice in my lifetime and the most notable event was the reaction of the politicians in the aftermath as they proclaimed the injustice of the system and demanded a new deal for the hapless and the poor.
nothing was corrected last time.
nothing will be changed this time.
the poor will remain poor.
the unemployed will remain so.
the homeless will remain homeless
and the politicians, fat upon the land, will thrive forever.

those marvelous lunches

when I was in grammar school my parents were poor and in my lunch bag there was only a peanut butter sandwich.
Richardson didn’t have a lunch bag, he had a lunch pail with compartments, a thermos full of chocolate milk.
he had ham sandwiches, sliced beef sandwiches, apples, bananas, a pickle and a large bag of potato chips.
I sat next to Richardson as we ate.
his potato chips looked so good— large and crisp as the sun blazed upon them.
“you want some potato chips?” he would ask.
and each day I would eat some.
as I went to school each day my thoughts were on Richardson’s lunch, and especially those chips.
each morning as we studied in class I thought about lunchtime.
and sitting next to Richardson.
Richardson was the sissy and the other boys looked down on me for eating with him
but I
didn’t care.
it was the potato chips, I couldn’t help myself.
“you want some potato chips, Henry?”
he would
ask.
“yes.”
the other boys got after me when Richardson wasn’t
around.
“hey, who’s your sissy friend?
you one
too?”
I didn’t like that but the potato chips were more important.
after a while nobody spoke to me.

sometimes I ate one of Richardson's apples or I got half a pickle.
I was always hungry.
Richardson was fat,
he had a big belly
and fleshy
thighs.
he was the only friend I had in grammar school.
we seldom spoke to each
other.
we just sat together at lunchtime.
I walked home with him after school and often some of the boys would follow us.
they
would gather around Richardson, gang up on him, push him around, knock him down
again and
again.
after they were finished I would go
pick up his lunch pail,
which was
spilled on its side
with the lid open.
I would place the thermos back inside, close the
lid.
then I would carry the pail as I walked Richardson back to his house.
we never spoke.
as we got to his door I would hand him the lunch pail.
then the door would close and he would be gone.
I was the only friend he had.
sissies live a hard life.

The Look:

I once bought a toy rabbit
at a department store
and now he sits and ponders
me with pink sheer eyes:
He wants golf balls and glass
walls.
I want quiet thunder.
Our disappointment sits between us.

the big one

he buys 5 cars a month, details them, waxes and buffs them out, then resells them at a profit of one or two grand.
he has a nice Jewish wife and he tells me that he bangs her until the walls shake.
he wears a red cap, squints in the light, has a regular job besides the car gig.
I have no idea of what he is trying to accomplish and maybe he doesn’t either.
he’s a nicer fellow than most, always good to see him, we laugh, say a few bright lines.
but
each time
after I see him
I get the blues for him, for me, for all of us:
for want of something to do
we keep slaying our small dragons
as the big one waits.

the genius

this man sometimes forgets who he is.
sometimes he thinks he's the Pope.
other times he thinks he's a hunted rabbit and hides under the bed.
then
all at once he'll recapture total clarity and begin creating works of art.
then he'll be all right for some time.
then, say, he'll be sitting with his wife and 3 or 4 other people discussing various matters
he will be charming, incisive, original.
then he'll do something strange.
like once he stood up unzipped and began pissing
on the
rug.
another time he ate a paper napkin.
and there was the time he got into his car and drove it backwards all the way to the grocery store and back again
backwards
the other motorists screaming at him but he
made it
there and back
without
incident
and without being
stopped
by a patrol car.
but he's best as the Pope
and his
Latin
is very
good.
his works of art

aren’t that exceptional but they allow him to survive
and to live with a series of
19-year-old wives
who
cut his hair his toenails bib tuck and
feed
him.
he wears everybody out but
himself.

about the PEN conference

take a writer away from his typewriter
and all you have left
is
the sickness
which started him
typing
in the
beginning.

what a man I was

I shot off his left ear then his right, and then tore off his belt buckle with hot lead, and then
I shot off everything that counts and when he bent over to pick up his drawers and his marbles (poor critter)
I fixed it so he wouldn't have to straighten up no more.
Ho Hum.
I went in for a fast snort and one guy seemed to be looking at me sideways, and that's how he died— sideways, lookin' at me
and clutchin'
for his marbles.
Sight o' blood made me kinda hungry.
Had a ham sandwich.
Played a couple of sentimental songs…
Shot out all the lights and strolled outside.
Didn't seem to be no one around
so I shot my horse
(poor critter).
Then I saw the Sheerf a standin' at the end a' the road and he was shakin'
like he had the Saint Vitus' dance; it was a real sorrowful sight so I slowed him to a quiver with the first slug and mercifully stiffened him with the second.
Then I laid on my back awhile and I shot out the stars one by one and then I shot out the moon and then I walked around and shot out every light in town, and pretty soon it began to get dark real dark the way I like it;
just can't stand to sleep with no light shinin'
on my face.
I laid down and dreamt I was a little boy again a playin' with my toy six-shooter and winnin' all the marble games,
and when I woke up
my guns was gone

and I was all bound hand and foot just like somebody was scared a me
and they was slippin’
a noose around my ugly neck just as if they meant to hang me,
and some guy was pinnin’
a real pretty sign
on my shirt:
there’s a law for you and a law for me and a law that hangs from the foot of a tree.
Well, pretty poetry always did make my eyes water and can you believe it all the women was cryin’
and though they was moanin’
other men’s names
I just know they was cryin’
for me (poor critters) and though I’d slept with all a them, I’d forgotten in all the big excitement to tell ’em my name
and all the men looked angry but I guess it was because the kids was all being impolite and a throwin’ tin cans at me, but I told ’em not to worry because their aim was bad anyhow not a boy there looked like he’d turn into a man— 90% homosexuals, the lot of them, and some guy shouted “let’s send him to hell!”
and with a jerk I was dancin’
my last dance,
but I swung out wide and spit in the bartender’s eye and stared down into Nellie Adam’s breasts, and my mouth watered again.

Scarlet

I'm glad when they arrive and I'm glad when they leave
I'm glad when I hear their heels approaching my door and I'm glad when those heels walk away
I'm glad to fuck I'm glad to care and I'm glad when it's over
and
since it's always either starting or finishing I'm glad most of the time
and the cats walk up and down and the earth spins around the sun and the phone rings:
"this is Scarlet."
"who?"
"Scarlet."
"o.k., get it on over."
and I hang up thinking maybe this is it
go in
take a quick shit shave
bathe
dress
dump the sacks and cartons of empty bottles
sit down to the sound of heels approaching more an army approaching than victory
it's Scarlet
and in my kitchen the faucet keeps dripping needs a washer.
I'll take care of it later.

like a flower in the rain

I cut the middle fingernail of the middle finger right hand
real short
and I began rubbing along her cunt as she sat upright in bed
spreading lotion over her arms face and breasts
after bathing.
then she lit a cigarette: “don’t let this put you off,”
and smoked and continued to rub the lotion on.
I continued to rub the cunt.
“you want an apple?” I asked.
“sure,” she said, “you got one?”
but I got to her— she began to twist then she rolled on her side, she was getting wet and open like a flower in the rain.
then she rolled on her stomach and her most beautiful ass looked up at me and I reached under and got the cunt again.
she reached around and got my cock, she rolled and twisted, I mounted my face falling into the mass of red hair that overflowed
from her head
and my fattened cock entered into the miracle.
later we joked about the lotion and the cigarette and the apple.
then I went out and got some chicken and shrimp and french fries and buns and mashed potatoes and gravy and cole slaw, and we ate. she told me how good she felt and I told her how good I felt and we ate the chicken and the shrimp and the french fries and the buns and the mashed potatoes and the gravy and the cole slaw too.

a killer

consistency is terrific: shark-mouth grubby interior with an almost perfect body, long blazing hair— it confuses me and others
she runs from man to man offering endearments
she speaks of love
then breaks each man to her will
shark-mouthed
grubby interior
we see it too late: after the cock gets swallowed the heart follows
her long blazing hair her almost perfect body walks down the street as the same sun falls upon flowers.

prayer in bad weather

by God, I don’t know what to do.
they’re so nice to have around.
they have a way of playing with the balls and looking at the cock very seriously turning it
tweeking it
examining each part as their long hair falls on your belly.
it’s not the fucking and sucking alone that reaches into a man and softens him, it’s the extras, it’s all the extras.
now it’s raining to night and there’s nobody they are elsewhere examining things in new bedrooms in new moods or maybe in old bedrooms.
anyhow, it’s raining to night, one hell of a dashing, pouring rain….
very little to do.
I’ve read the newspaper paid the gas bill the electric co.
the phone bill.
it keeps raining.
they soften a man and then let him swim in his own juice.
I need an old-fashioned whore at the door to night closing her green umbrella, drops of moonlit rain on her purse, saying, “shit, man, can’t you get better music than *that* on your radio?
and turn up the heat…”
it’s always when a man’s swollen with love and everything else that it keeps raining splattering flooding
rain
good for the trees and the grass and the air…
good for things that live alone.
I would give anything for a female’s hand on me tonight.
they soften a man and then leave him listening to the rain.

melancholia

the history of melancholia includes all of us.
me, I writhe in dirty sheets while staring at blue walls and nothing.
I have gotten so used to melancholia that I greet it like an old friend.
I will now do 15 minutes of grieving for the lost redhead, I tell the gods.
I do it and feel quite bad quite sad,
then I rise CLEANSED
even though nothing is solved.
that's what I get for kicking religion in the ass.
I should have kicked the redhead in the ass where her brains and her bread and butter are at…
but, no, I've felt sad about everything: the lost redhead was just another smash in a lifelong loss…
I listen to drums on the radio now and grin.
there is something wrong with me besides melancholia.

eat your heart out

I've come by, she says, to tell you that this is it. I'm not kidding, it's over. this is it.

I sit on the couch watching her arrange her long red hair before my bedroom mirror.

she pulls her hair up and piles it on top of her head— she lets her eyes look at my eyes— then she drops the hair and lets it fall down in front of her face.

we go to bed and I hold her speechlessly from the back my arm around her neck I touch her wrists and hands feel up to her elbows

no further.

she gets up.

this is it, she says, eat your heart out. you got any rubber bands?

I don't know.

here's one, she says, this will do. well, I'm going.

I get up and walk her to the door

just as she leaves she says, I want you to buy me some high-heeled shoes with tall thin spikes, black high-heeled shoes.

no, I want them red.

I watch her walk down the cement walk under the trees she walks all right and as the poinsettias drip in the sun I close the door.

I made a mistake

I reached up into the top of the closet and took out a pair of blue pan ties and showed them to her and asked "are these yours?"

and she looked and said,

"no, those belong to a dog."

she left after that and I haven't seen her since. she's not at her place.

I keep going there, leaving notes stuck into the door. I go back and the notes are still there. I take the Maltese cross cut it down from my car mirror, tie it to her doorknob with a shoelace, leave a book of poems.

when I go back the next night everything is still there.

I keep searching the streets for that blood-wine battleship she drives with a weak battery, and the doors hanging from broken hinges.

I drive around the streets an inch away from weeping, ashamed of my sentimentality and possible love.

a confused old man driving in the rain wondering where the good luck went.

she comes from somewhere

probably from the belly button or from the shoe under the bed, or maybe from the mouth of the shark or from the car crash on the avenue that leaves blood and memories scattered on the grass.
she comes from love gone wrong under an asphalt moon.
she comes from screams stuffed with cotton.
she comes from hands without arms and arms without bodies and bodies without hearts.
she comes out of cannons and shotguns and old victrolas.
she comes from parasites with blue eyes and soft voices.
she comes out from under the organ like a roach.
she keeps coming.
she's inside of sardine cans and letters.
she's under your fingernails pressing blue and flat.
she's the signpost on the barricade smeared in brown.
she's the toy soldiers inside your head poking their lead bayonets.
she's the first kiss and the last kiss and the dog's guts spilling like a river.
she comes from somewhere and she never stops coming.
me, and that
old woman:
sorrow.

The High-Rise of the New World

it is an orange animal with
hand grenades fire power big teeth and a horn of smoke
a colored man with cigar yanks at
gears and the damn thing never gets tired
my neighbor
….n old man in blue bathing trunks ….n old man a fetid white obscene thing— the old man lifts apart some purple flowers and peeks through the fence at the orange animal
and like a horror movie I see the orange animal open its mouth— it belches it has teeth fastened onto a giraffe's neck— and it reached over the fence and it gets the old man in his blue
bathing trunks neatly it gets him
from behind the fence of purple flowers and his whiteness is like garbage in the air and then he's dumped into a shock of lumber
and then the orange animal backs off spins
turns
runs off into the Hollywood Hills the palm trees the boulevards as
the colored man sucks red steam from his cigar
I'll be glad when it's all over the noise is
terrible and I'm afraid to go and buy a paper.

car wash

got out, fellow said, "hey!" walked toward me, we shook hands, he slipped me 2 red tickets for free car washes, "find you later,"

I told him, walked on through to waiting area with wife, we sat on outside bench.

black fellow with a limp came up, said, "hey, man, how's it going?"

I answered, "fine, bro, you makin' it?"

"no problem," he said, then walked off to dry down a Caddy.

"these people know you?" my wife asked.

"no."

"how come they talk to you?"

"they like me, people have always liked me, it's my cross."

then our car was finished, fellow flipped his rag at me, we got up, got to the car, I slipped him a buck, we got in, I started the engine, the foreman walked up, big guy with dark shades, huge guy, he smiled a big one, "good to see you, man!"

I smiled back, "thanks, but it's your party, man!"

I pulled out into traffic, "they know you,"

said my wife.

"sure," I said, "I've been there."

Van Gogh

vain vanilla ladies strutting while van Gogh did it to himself.
girls pulling on silk hose while van Gogh did it to himself in the field
unkissed, and worse.
I pass him on the street: “how’s it going, Van?”
“I dunno, man,” he says and walks on.
there is a blast of color: one more creature dizzy with love.
he said,
then,
I want to leave.
and they look at his paintings and love him now.
for that kind of love he did the right thing
as for the other kind of love it never arrived.

the railroad yard

the feelings I get
driving past the railroad yard (never on purpose but on my way to somewhere) are the feelings other men have for other things.
I see the tracks and all the boxcars the tank cars the flat cars all of them motionless and so many of them perfectly lined up and not an engine anywhere (where are all the engines?).
I drive past looking sideways at it all a wide, still railroad yard not a human in sight then I am past the yard
and it wasn't just the romance of it all that gives me what I get but something back there nameless always making me feel better as some men feel better looking at the open sea or the mountains or at wild animals or at a woman I like those things too
especially the wild animals and the woman but when I see those lovely old boxcars with their faded painted lettering and those flat cars and those fat round tankers all lined up and waiting I get quiet inside
I get what other men get from other things I just feel better and it's good to feel better whenever you can not needing a reason.

[the girls at the green hotel]

are more beautiful than movie stars and they lounge on the lawn sunbathing and one sits in a short dress and high heels, legs crossed exposing miraculous thighs.
she has a bandanna on her head and smokes a long cigarette.
traffic slows almost stops.
the girls ignore the traffic.
they are half asleep in the afternoon they are whores they are whores without souls and they are magic because they lie about nothing.
I get in my car wait for traffic to clear,
drive across the street to the green hotel to my favorite: she is sunbathing on the lawn nearest the curb.
“hello,” I say.
she turns eyes like imitation diamonds up at me.
her face has no expression.
I drop my latest book of poems out the car window.
it falls
by her side.
I shift into low,
drive off.
there’ll be some laughs to night.

in other words

the Egyptians loved the cat were often entombed with it instead of with the women and never with the dog
but now here
good people with good eyes are very few
yet fine cats with great style lounge about in the alleys of the universe.
about
our argument to night what ever it was about and
no matter how unhappy it made us feel
remember that there is a cat somewhere adjusting to the
space of itself with a delightful grace
in other words magic persists without us no matter what we may try to do to spoil it.

Destroying Beauty

a rose red sunlight; I take it apart in the garage like a puzzle: the petals are as greasy as old bacon and fall like the maidens of the world backs to floor and I look up at the old calendar hung from a nail and touch my wrinkled face and smile because the secret is beyond me.

peace

near the corner table in the cafe a middle-aged couple sit.
they have finished their meal and they are each drinking a beer.
it is 9 in the evening.
she is smoking a cigarette.
then he says something.
she nods.
then she speaks.
he grins, moves his hand.
then they are quiet.
through the blinds next to their table flashing red neon blinks on and off.
there is no war.
there is no hell.
then he raises his beer bottle.
it is green.
he lifts it to his lips, tilts it.
it is a coronet.
her right elbow is on the table and in her hand she holds the cigarette between her thumb and forefinger and as she watches him
the streets outside flower in the
night.

afternoons into night

looking out the window smoking rolled cigarettes drinking Sanka and watching the workers come on in I wonder, how much longer can I get away with this?
stories and poems and paintings surviving on that.
an insane girlfriend years younger who loves me
types at her novel in the kitchen.
my stories, my poems…
what is a poem?
a book by Céline sits on the edge of the bathtub.
I read it when I bathe and laugh.
the workers come in now I see their faces, the insides scraped away, the outsides missing.
I’ve had their jobs,
their goldfish security.
Segovia plays to me so softly from the radio, the daylight’s going.
look here—
the trip’s been worth it, while the jetliners go to New York and Georgia and Texas I sit surrounded by hymns that nobody can ever take away as the workers bend over hot soup and cold wives.
(uncollected)

we ain't got no money, honey, but we got rain

call it the green house effect or what ever but it just doesn't rain like it used to.
I particularly remember the rains of the depression era.
there wasn't any money but there was plenty of rain.
it wouldn't rain for just a night or a day, it would RAIN for 7 days and 7
nights
and in Los Angeles the storm drains weren't built to carry off that much water and the rain came down THICK and MEAN and STEADY
and you HEARD it banging against the roofs and into the ground waterfalls of it came down from the roofs and often there was HAIL
big ROCKS OF ICE
bombing
exploding
smashing into things and the rain just wouldn't
STOP
and all the roofs leaked—
cooking pots
were placed all about; they dripped loudly and had to be emptied again and again.
the rain came up over the street curbings, across the lawns, climbed the steps and entered the houses.
there were mops and bathroom towels, and the rain often came up through the toilets: bubbling, brown, crazy, whirling, and the old cars stood in the streets, cars that had problems starting on a sunny day, and the jobless men stood looking out the windows at the old machines dying like living things out there.
the jobless men, failures in a failing time were imprisoned in their houses with their wives and children and their pets.

the pets refused to go out and left their waste in strange places.
the jobless men went mad confined with their once beautiful wives.
there were terrible arguments as notices of foreclosure fell into the mailbox.
rain and hail, cans of beans, bread without butter; fried eggs, boiled eggs, poached eggs; peanut butter sandwiches, and an invisible chicken in every pot.
my father, never a good man at best, beat my mother when it rained as I threw myself between them,
the legs, the knees, the screams until they
separated.
"*I'll kill you,*" I screamed at him. "*You hit her again and I'll kill you!*"
"Get that son-of-a-bitching kid out of here!"
"no, Henry, you stay with your mother!"
all the house holds were under siege but I believe that ours held more terror than the average.
and at night
as we attempted to sleep the rains still came down and it was in bed in the dark watching the moon against the scarred window so bravely holding out
most of the rain, I thought of Noah and the Ark and I thought, it has come again.
we all thought
that.
and then, at once, it would stop.
and it always seemed to stop
around 5 or 6 a.m., peaceful then, but not an exact silence
because things continued to drip drip
drip
and there was no smog then and by 8 a.m.
there was a
blazing yellow sunlight, van Gogh yellow— crazy, blinding!
and then

the roof drains
relieved of the rush of water
began to expand in the warmth:
PANG! PANG! PANG!
and everybody got up and looked outside and there were all the lawns still soaked greener than green will ever be
and there were the birds on the lawn CHIRPING like mad, they hadn't eaten decently for 7 days and 7 nights and they were weary of berries
and
they waited as the worms rose to the top, half-drowned worms.
the birds plucked them up
and gobbled them down; there were blackbirds and sparrows.
the blackbirds tried to drive the sparrows off but the sparrows, maddened with hunger, smaller and quicker, got their due.
the men stood on their porches smoking cigarettes, now knowing they'd have to go out there
to look for that job that probably wasn't there, to start that car that probably wouldn't start.
and the once beautiful wives
stood in their bathrooms combing their hair,
applying makeup, trying to put their world back together again, trying to forget that awful sadness that gripped them, wondering what they could fix for breakfast.
and on the radio we were told that school was now open.
and
soon
there I was
on the way to school, massive puddles in the street, the sun like a new world,
my parents back in that house,
I arrived at my classroom on time.
Mrs. Sorenson greeted us with, "we won't have our usual recess, the grounds are too wet."
"AW!" most of the boys went.

"but we are going to do something special at recess," she went on, "and it will be fun!"

well, we all wondered what that would be

and the two-hour wait seemed a long time as Mrs. Sorenson went about teaching her

lessons.

I looked at the little girls, they all looked so pretty and clean and alert, they sat still and straight

and their hair was beautiful

in the California sunshine.

then the recess bell rang and we all waited for the fun.

then Mrs. Sorenson told us:

"now, what we are going to do is we are going to tell each other what we did during the rainstorm!

we'll begin in the front row and go right around!

now, Michael, you're first!…"

well, we all began to tell our stories, Michael began and it went on and on, and soon we realized that we were all lying, not exactly lying but mostly lying and some of the boys began to snicker and some of the girls began to give them dirty looks and Mrs. Sorenson said, "all right, I demand a modicum of silence here!

I am interested in what you did

during the rainstorm

even if you

aren't!"

so we had to tell our stories and they *were* stories.

one girl said that when the rainbow first came she saw God's face at the end of it.

only she didn't say which end.

one boy said he stuck his fishing pole out the window and caught a little fish

and fed it to his cat.

almost everybody told a lie.

the truth was just too awful and embarrassing to

tell.

then the bell rang and recess was over.
“thank you,” said Mrs.
Sorenson, “that was very nice.
and tomorrow the grounds will be dry and we will put them to use
again.”
most of the boys cheered
and the little girls sat very straight and still, looking so pretty and clean and
alert,
their hair beautiful in a sunshine that the world might never see
again.

marina:

majestic, magic infinite my little girl is sun
on the carpet— out the door picking a flower, ha!, an old man, battle-wrecked, emerges from his chair and she looks at me but only sees love, ha!, and I become quick with the world and love right back just like I was meant to do.

Trollius and trellises

of course, I may die in the next ten minutes and I’m ready for that but what I’m really worried about is that my editor-publisher might retire even though he is ten years younger than I.
it was just 25 years ago (I was at that *ripe* old age of 45) when we began our unholy alliance to test the literary waters, neither of us being much known.
I think we had some luck and still have some of same yet
the odds are pretty fair that he will opt for warm and pleasant afternoons in the garden
long before I.
writing is its own intoxication while publishing and editing, attempting to collect bills carries its own attrition which also includes dealing with the petty bitchings and demands of many so-called genius darlings who are not.
I won’t blame him for getting out and hope he sends me photos of his Rose Lane, his Gardenia Avenue.
will I have to seek other promulgators?
that fellow in the Russian fur hat?
or that beast in the East with all that hair in his ears, with those wet and greasy lips?
or will my editor-publisher upon exiting for that world of Trollius and trellis hand over the
machinery
of his former trade to a cousin, a daughter or
some Poundian from Big Sur?
or will he just pass the legacy on to the Shipping Clerk who will rise like Lazarus,
fingering newfound importance?
one can imagine terrible things: “Mr. Chinaski, all your work must now be submitted in Rondo form and
typed
triple-spaced on rice paper.”

power corrupts, life aborts
and all you
have left
is a
bunch of
warts.
"no, no, Mr. Chinaski: *Rondo* form!"
"hey, man," I'll ask, "haven't you heard of the thirties?"
"the thirties? what's that?"
my present editor-publisher and I at times
did discuss the thirties, the Depression and some of the little tricks it taught us— like how to endure on almost nothing and move forward anyhow.
well, John, if it happens enjoy your divertissement to plant husbandry, cultivate and aerate between bushes, water only in the early morning, spread shredding to discourage weed growth and
as I do in my writing: use plenty of manure.
and thank you
for locating me there at 5124 DeLongpre Avenue somewhere between
alcoholism and madness.
together we
laid down the gauntlet and there are takers even at this late date still to be found
as the fire sings through the trees.

beagle

do not bother the beagle lying there away from grass and flowers and paths, dreaming dogdreams, or perhaps dreaming nothing, as men do awake; yes, leave him be, in that simple juxtaposition, out of the maelstrom, lucifugous as a bat, searching bat-inward for a state of grace.

it's good. we'll not ransom our fate or his for doorknobs or rasps.

the east wind whirls the blinds, our beagle snuffles in his sleep as outside, outside, hedges break, the night torn mad with footsteps.

our beagle spreads a paw, the lamp burns warm bathed in the life of his size.

coffee and babies

I sleep at Lila's and in the morning we get the breakfast special at the local cafe, then it's up to her friend Buffy's.

Buffy has boy twins, father in doubt, and lives on relief in a $150-a-month apt.

the twins wail, crawl about, I pick one up, he pulls at my goatee.

"how nice," I say, "to be sitting with 2 lovely ladies at ten in the morning in the city of Burbank while other men work."

every time the twins get changed I note they have hard-ons (their troubles begin at the age of one) and their asses are red with rash and sadness.

"I used to open and close the bars," I say, "I used to whip men 20 years younger than myself. now I sit with women and babies."

we have our coffees. I borrow a cigarette. (Buffy knows I am good for it. I'll buy her a pack later.) the girls joke about my ugly face.

I smoke. after this I need some profundities but Buddha doesn't help much.

Buffy gets up and shakes her behind at me: "you can't have me, Chinaski, you're too old, you're too ugly."

well, you see, it's difficult for me. Lila and I finish our coffees and climb down the green steps to the blue-green swimming pool. it is 11 a.m. India and Pakistan are at war. we get into my smashed '62 Comet. it starts. well, we can go to the races, we can screw again,

we can sleep, we can have a Mexican marriage, we can argue and split or she can read to me about fresh murders in the *Herald-Examiner*.

it ends up

we argue and split and I forget to go get Buffy her pack of cigarettes.

(uncollected)

magical mystery tour

I am in this low-slung sports car painted a deep, rich yellow driving under an Italian sun.
I have a British accent.
I'm wearing dark shades an expensive silk shirt.
there's no dirt under my fingernails.
the radio plays Vivaldi and there are two women with me one with raven hair the other a blonde.
they have small breasts and beautiful legs and they laugh at everything I say.
as we drive up a steep road the blonde squeezes my leg and nestles closer while raven hair leans across and nibbles my ear.
we stop for lunch at a quaint rustic inn.
there is more laughter before lunch during lunch and after lunch.
after lunch we will have a flat tire on the other side of the mountain and the blonde will change the tire while
raven hair photographs me lighting my pipe leaning against a tree the perfect background perfectly at peace with sunlight
flowers
clouds
birds
everywhere.
(uncollected)

the last generation

it was much easier to be a genius in the twenties, there were only 3 or 4 literary magazines and if you got into them 4 or 5 times you could end up in Gertie's parlor you could possibly meet Picasso for a glass of wine, or maybe only Miró.
and yes, if you sent your stuff postmarked from Paris chances of publication became much better.
most writers bottomed their manuscripts with the word "Paris" and the date.
and with a patron there was time to write, eat, drink and take drives to Italy and sometimes Greece.
it was good to be photo'd with others of your kind it was good to look tidy, enigmatic and thin.
photos taken on the beach were great.
and yes, you could write letters to the 15 or 20
others
bitching about this and that.
you might get a letter from Ezra or from Hem; Ezra liked to give directions and Hem liked to practice his writing in his letters when he couldn't do the other.
it was a romantic grand game then, full of the fury of discovery.
now
now there are so many of us, hundreds of literary magazines, hundreds of presses, thousands of titles.
who is to survive out of all this mulch?
it's almost improper to ask.
I go back, I read the books about the lives of the boys and girls of the twenties.
if they were the Lost Generation, what would you call us?
sitting here among the warheads with our electric-touch typewriters?
the Last Generation?

I'd rather be Lost than Last but as I read these books about *them* I feel a gentleness and a generosity
as I read of the suicide of Harry Crosby in his hotel room with his whore that seems as real to me as the faucet dripping now in my bathroom sink.
I like to read about *them:* Joyce blind and prowling the bookstores like a tarantula, they said.
Dos Passos with his clipped newscasts using a pink typewriter ribbon.
D.H. horny and pissed off, H.D. being smart enough to use her initials which seemed much more literary than Hilda Doolittle.
G. B. Shaw, long established, as noble and dumb as royalty, flesh and brain turning to marble. a bore.
Huxley promenading his brain with great glee, arguing with Lawrence that it wasn't in the belly and the balls, that the glory was in the skull.
and that hick Sinclair Lewis coming to light.
meanwhile
the revolution being over, the Russians were liberated and dying.
Gorky with nothing to fight for, sitting in a room trying to find phrases praising the government.
many others broken in victory.
now
now there are so many of us
but we should be grateful, for in a hundred years if the world is not destroyed, think, how much there will be left of all of this: nobody really able to fail or to succeed—just relative merit, diminished further by our numerical superiority.
we will all be cata logued and filed.
all right…
if you still have doubts of those other golden times there were other curious creatures: Richard
Aldington, Teddy Dreiser, F. Scott, Hart Crane, Wyndham Lewis, the Black Sun Press.

but to me, the twenties centered mostly on Hemingway coming out of the war and beginning to type.
it was all so simple, all so deliciously clear
now
there are so many of us.
Ernie, you had no idea how good it had been four de cades later when you blew your brains into the orange juice
although
I grant you
that was not your best work.

about competition

the higher you climb
the greater the pressure.
those who manage to
endure
learn
that the distance
between the
top and the
bottom
is
obscenely
great.
and those who
succeed
know
this secret:
there isn’t
one.

a radio with guts

it was on the 2nd floor on Coronado Street I used to get drunk and throw the radio through the window while it was playing, and, of course, it would break the glass in the window and the radio would sit out there on the roof still playing and I'd tell my woman, "Ah, what a marvelous radio!"
the next morning I'd take the window off the hinges and carry it down the street to the glass man who would put in another pane.
I kept throwing that radio through the window each time I got drunk and it would sit out there on the roof still playing— a magic radio a radio with guts,
and each morning I'd take the window back to the glass man.
I don't remember how it ended exactly though I do remember we finally moved out.
there was a woman downstairs who worked in the garden in her bathing suit and her husband complained he couldn't sleep nights because of me
so we moved out
and in the next place I either forgot to throw the radio out the window or I didn't feel like it anymore.
I do remember missing the woman who worked in the garden in her bathing suit, she really dug with that trowel and she put her behind up in the air and I used to sit in the window and watch the sun shine all over that thing
while the music played.

the egg

he's 17.
mother, he said, how do I crack an egg?
all right, she said to me, you don't have to sit there looking like that.
oh, mother, he said, you broke the yolk.
I can't eat a broken yolk.
all right, she said to me, you're so tough, you've been in the slaughter houses, factories, the jails, you're so goddamned tough, but all people don't have to be like you, that doesn't make everybody else wrong and you right.
mother, he said, can you bring me some cokes when you come home from work?
look, Raleigh, she said, can't you get the cokes on your bike, I'm tired after work.
but, mama, there's a hill.
what hill, Raleigh?
there's a hill,
it's there and I have to pedal over it.
all right, she said to me, you think you're so goddamned tough. you worked on a railroad track gang, I hear about it every time you get drunk: "I worked on a railroad track gang."
well, I said, I did.
I mean, what difference does it make?
everybody has to work somewhere.
mama, said the kid, will you bring me those cokes?
I really like the kid. I think he's very gentle. and once he learns how to crack an egg he may do some unusual things. meanwhile I sleep with his mother and try to stay out of arguments.

a killer gets ready

he was a good one say 18, 19, a marine
and every time a woman came down the train aisle he seemed to stand up so I couldn't see her and the woman smiled at him
but I didn't smile at him
he kept looking at himself in the train window and standing up and taking off his coat and then standing up and putting it back on
he polished his belt buckle with a delighted vigor
and his neck was red and his face was red and his eyes were a pretty blue
but I didn't like him
and every time I went to the can he was either in one of the cans
or he was in front of one of the mirrors combing his hair or shaving
and he was always walking up and down the aisles or drinking water I watched his Adam's apple juggle the water down
he was always in my eyes
but we never spoke and I remembered all the other trains all the other buses all the other wars
he got off at Pasadena vainer than any woman he got off at Pasadena proud and dead
the rest of the train ride— 8 or 10 miles— was perfect.

in the center of the action

in the center of the action you have to lay down like an animal until it charges, you have to lay down in the center of the action
lay down and wait until it charges then you must get up
face it get it before it gets you
the whole pro cess is more shy than vulnerable so
lay down and wait sometimes it's ten minutes sometimes it's years sometimes it never arrives but you can't rush it push it there's no way to cheat or get a jump on it you have to
lay down
lay down and wait like an animal.

poetry

it
takes
a lot of
desperation
dissatisfaction
and
disillusion
to
write
a
few
good
poems.
it’s not
for
everybody
either to
write
it
or even to
read
it.

notes upon the flaxen aspect:

a John F. Kennedy flower knocks upon my door and is shot through the neck; the gladiolas gather by the dozens around the tip of India dripping into Ceylon; dozens of oysters read Germaine Greer.

meanwhile, I itch from the slush of the Philippines to the eye of the minnow the minnow being eaten by the cumulative dreams of Simón Bolívar. O, freedom from the limitation of angular distance would be delicious.

war is perfect,

the solid way drips and leaks, Schopenhauer laughed for 72 years, and I was told by a very small man in a New York City pawnshop one afternoon:

“Christ got more attention than I did but I went further on less…”

well, the distance between 5 points is the same as the distance between 3 points is the same as the distance between one point:

it is all as cordial as a bonbon: all this that we are wrapped in:

eunuchs are more exact than sleep

the postage stamp is mad, Indiana is ridiculous

the chameleon is the last walking flower.

the fisherman

he comes out at 7:30 a.m. every day with 3 peanut butter sandwiches, and there's one can of beer which he floats in the bait bucket.

he fishes for hours with a small trout pole three-quarters of the way down the pier.

he's 75 years old and the sun doesn't tan him, and no matter how hot it gets the brown and green lumberjack stays on.

he catches starfish, baby sharks, and mackerel; he catches them by the dozen, speaks to nobody.

sometime during the day he drinks his can of beer.

at 6 p.m. he gathers his gear and his catch walks down the pier

across several streets where he enters a small Santa Monica apartment goes to the bedroom and opens the evening paper as his wife throws the starfish, the sharks, the mackerel into the garbage

he lights his pipe

and waits for dinner.

the 1930s

places to hunt
places to hide are
getting harder to find, and pet canaries and goldfish too, did you notice that?
I remember when pool halls were pool halls not just tables in bars;
and I remember when neighborhood women used to cook pots of beef stew for their unemployed husbands when their bellies were sick with fear; and I remember when kids used to watch the rain for hours and would fight to the end over a pet rat; and I remember when the boxers were all Jewish and Irish and never gave you a bad fight; and when the biplanes flew so low you could see the pi lot’s face and goggles; and when one ice cream bar in ten had a free coupon inside; and when for 3 cents you could buy enough candy to make you sick or last a whole
afternoon; and when the people in the neighborhood raised chickens in their backyards; and when we’d stuff a 5-cent toy auto full of candle wax to make it last forever; and when we built our own kites and scooters; and I remember when our parents fought
(you could hear them for blocks) and they fought for hours, screaming blood-death curses and the cops never came.
places to hunt and places to hide, they’re just not around anymore. I remember when each 4th lot was vacant and overgrown, and the landlord only got his rent when you had
it, and each day was clear and good and each moment was full of promise.

the burning of the dream

the old L.A. Public Library burned down that library downtown and with it went a large part of my youth.
I sat on one of those stone benches there with my friend Baldy when he asked,
"you gonna join the Abraham Lincoln Brigade?"
"sure," I told
him.
but realizing that I wasn't an intellectual or a political idealist I backed off on that one
later.
I was a *reader* then going from room to room: literature, philosophy, religion, even medicine and geology.
early on
I decided to be a writer, I thought it might be the easy way out
and the big boy novelists didn't look too tough to me.
I had more trouble with Hegel and Kant.
the thing that bothered me
about everybody
is that they took so long to finally say something lively and /
or
interesting.
I thought I had it over everybody then.
I was to discover two things: a) most publishers thought that anything boring had something to do with things profound.
b) that it would take decades of living and writing before I would be able to put down
a sentence that was anywhere near what I wanted it to be.
meanwhile
while other young men chased the ladies I chased the old books.
I was a bibliophile, albeit a disenchanted one
and this
and the world

shaped me.
I lived in a plywood hut behind a rooming house for $3.50 a week
feeling like a
Chatterton
stuffed inside of some Thomas Wolfe.
my greatest problem was stamps, envelopes, paper and wine,
with the world on the edge
of World War II.
I hadn't yet been confused by the female, I was a virgin and I wrote from 3 to 5 short stories a week and they all came back from *The New Yorker, Harper's, The Atlantic Monthly.*
I had read where Ford Madox Ford used to paper his bathroom with his rejection slips but I didn't have a bathroom so I stuck them into a drawer and when it got so stuffed with them I could barely open it
I took all the rejects out and threw them away along with the stories.
still
the old L.A. Public Library remained my home and the home of many other bums.
we discreetly used the restrooms
and the only ones of us
to be evicted were those who fell asleep at the library tables—nobody snores like a bum unless it's somebody you're married to.
well, I wasn't *quite* abum. *I* had a library card and I checked books in and out large
stacks of them always taking the limit allowed:
Aldous Huxley, D. H. Lawrence, e. e. cummings, Conrad Aiken, Fyodor Dos, Dos Passos, Turgenev, Gorky, H.D., Freddie Nietzsche, Art Schopenhauer, Steinbeck,
Hemingway,
and so
forth…

I always expected the librarian to say, “you have good taste, young man…”
but the old fried and wasted bitch didn’t even know who she was let alone
me.
but those shelves held tremendous grace: they allowed me to discover the early Chinese poets like Tu Fu and Li Po who could say more in one line than most could say in thirty or a hundred.
Sherwood Anderson must have read these
too.
I also carried the *Cantos* in and out and Ezra helped me strengthen my arms if not my brain.
that wondrous place the L.A. Public Library it was a home for a person who had had a home of
hell
BROOKS TOO BROAD FOR LEAPING
FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD
POINT COUNTER POINT
THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER
James Thurber
John Fante
Rabelais
de Maupassant
some didn’t work for me: Shakespeare, G. B. Shaw, Tolstoy, Robert Frost, F. Scott Fitzgerald
Upton Sinclair worked better for me than Sinclair Lewis and I considered Gogol and Dreiser complete fools
but such judgments come more from a man’s forced manner of living than from his reason.
the old L.A. Public most probably kept me from becoming a suicide
a bank
robber
a
wife—

beater
a butcher or a
motorcycle policeman and even though some of these might be fine it is
thanks
to my luck
and my way
that this library was there when I was young and looking to *hold* on to something when there seemed very little about.
and when I opened the newspaper and read of the fire which destroyed the
library and most of its contents
I said to my
wife: “I used to spend my
time
there…”
THE PRUSSIAN OFFICER
THE DARING YOUNG MAN ON THE FLYING TRAPEZE
TO HAVE AND HAVE NOT
YOU CAN’T GO HOME AGAIN.

sit and endure

well, first Mae West died and then George Raft, and Eddie G. Robinson's been gone a long time, and Bogart and Gable and Grable, and Laurel and Hardy and the Marx Brothers, all those Saturday afternoons at the movies as a boy are gone now and I look around this room and it looks back at me and then out through the window.

time hangs helpless from the doorknob as a gold paperweight of an owl looks up at me (an old man now) who must sit and endure these many empty Saturday afternoons.

Goldfish

my goldfish stares with watery eyes into the hemisphere of my sorrow; upon the thinnest of threads we hang together, hang hang hang

in the hangman's noose; I stare into his place and he into mine…

he must have thoughts, can you deny this?

he has eyes and hunger and his love too died in January; but he is gold, really gold, and I am gray and it is indecent to search him out, indecent like the burning of peaches or the rape of children, and I turn and look elsewhere, but I know that he is there behind me, one gold goblet of blood, one thing alone hung between the reddest cloud of purgatory and apt. no. 303.

god, can it be

that we are the same?

finish

the hearse comes through the room filled with the beheaded, the disappeared, the living mad.
the flies are a glue of sticky paste their wings will not lift.
I watch an old woman beat her cat with a broom.
the weather is unendurable a dirty trick by God.
the water has evaporated from the toilet bowl the telephone rings without sound the small limp arm petering against the bell.
I see a boy on his bicycle
the spokes collapse the tires turn into snakes and melt away.
the newspaper is oven-hot men murder each other in the streets without reason.
the worst men have the best jobs the best men have the worst jobs or are unemployed or locked in mad houses.
I have 4 cans of food left.
air-conditioned troops go from house to
house
from room to room
jailing, shooting, bayoneting the people.
we have done this to ourselves, we deserve this we are like roses that have never bothered to bloom when we should have bloomed and it is as if the sun has become disgusted with waiting it is as if the sun were a mind that has given up on us.
I go out on the back porch and look across the sea of dead plants now thorns and sticks shivering in a windless sky.
somehow I'm glad we're through finished— the works of Art the wars
the decayed loves
the way we lived each day.
when the troops come up here I don't care what they do for we already killed ourselves each day we got out of bed.
I go back into the kitchen spill some hash from a soft can, it is almost cooked already and I sit

eating, looking at my fingernails.

the sweat comes down behind my ears and I hear the shooting in the streets and I chew and wait without wonder.

dreaming

I live alone in a small room
and read the newspapers
and sleep alone in the dark
dreaming of crowds.
(uncollected)

my special craving

what is it about lobsters and crabs?

those white-pink shells that always make me hungry just looking at them there in the butcher's display case tossed casually one upon the other so kind and pink and waiting.

even alive they make me hungry.

I used to unload them from trucks for the kitchen at the Biltmore Hotel, and they looked dangerous moving about in their slatted boxes but still they made me hungry. there is something about crabs and lobsters they *deserve* to be eaten, they go so well with french fries, french bread, radishes and beer. they tell me that they boil them alive, and this does cause some minor sense of disturbance within me, but outside of that lobsters and crabs are one of the few things that make the earth a happy place.

I suppose that this is my special craving. when driving along the beachfront and I see a sign, LOBSTER HOUSE, my car turns in of its own accord. (if a man can't allow himself a few luxuries he just isn't going to last very long.) crabs, beer, lobsters,

an occasional lady,

2 or 3 days a week at the track, my small daughter bringing me a bottle of beer from the refrigerator while grinning proudly, there are some wonderful things in life, (let each man find his own) I say lighting my cigar, thinking about Sunday night lobster dinner, love love love running wild,

it feels good sometimes just to be living with something so nice in store.

(uncollected)

A Love Poem

all the women all their kisses the different ways they love and talk and need.
their ears they all have ears and throats and dresses and shoes and automobiles and ex-husbands.
mostly
the women are very warm they remind me of buttered toast with the butter melted in.
there is a look in the eye: they have been taken they have been fooled. I don’t quite know what to do for them.
I am
a fair cook a good listener but I never learned to dance—I was busy then with larger things.
but I’ve enjoyed their different beds smoking cigarettes staring at the ceilings. I was neither vicious nor unfair. only a student.
I know they all have these feet and barefoot they go across the floor as I watch their bashful buttocks in the dark. I know that they like me, some even love me but I love very few.
some give me oranges and vitamin pills; others talk quietly of childhood and fathers and landscapes; some are almost crazy but none of them are without meaning; some love well, others not so; the best at sex are not always the best in other ways; each has limits as I have limits and we learn each other quickly.
all the women all the women all the
bedrooms
the rugs the
photos the
curtains, it’s something like a church only at times there’s laughter.
those ears those arms those elbows those eyes
looking, the fondness and the wanting I have been held I have been held.

one writer’s funeral

there was a rock-and-mud slide on the Pacific Coast Highway and we had to take a detour and they directed us up into the Malibu hills and traffic was slow and it was hot, and then we were lost.
but I spotted a hearse and said, “there’s the hearse, we’ll follow it,” and my woman said, “that’s not the hearse,” and I said, “yes, that’s the hearse.”
the hearse took a left and I followed it as it went up
a narrow dirt road and then pulled over and I thought, “he’s lost too.” there was a truck and a man selling strawberries parked there and I pulled over
and asked
where the church was and he gave me directions and my woman told the strawberry man, “we’ll buy some strawberries on the way back.” then I swung onto the road and the hearse started up again and we continued to drive along until we reached that
church.
we were going
to the funeral of a great man but
the crowd was very sparse: the family, a couple of old screenwriter friends, two or three others. we
spoke to the family and to the wife of the deceased
and then we went in and the service began and the priest wasn’t so good but one of the great man’s sons gave a fine eulogy, and then it was over and we were outside again, in our car, following the hearse again, back down the steep road
passing the strawberry truck again and my woman said, “let’s not stop for strawberries,”
and as we continued to the graveyard, I thought, Fante, you were one of the best writers ever and this is one sad day.
finally we were at the graveside, the priest said a few words and then it was over.

I walked up to the widow who sat very pale and beautiful and quite alone on a folding metal chair.

“Hank,” she said, “it’s hard,” and I tried in vain to say something that might comfort her.

we walked away then, leaving her there, and I felt terrible.

I got a friend to drive my girlfriend back to town while I drove to the racetrack, made it just in time for the first race, got my bet down as the mutuel clerk looked at me in wonder and said, “Jesus Christ, how come you’re wearing a necktie?”

the wine of forever

re-reading some of Fante's *The Wine of Youth* in bed this mid-afternoon my big cat BEAKER
asleep beside me.
the writing of some men is like a vast bridge that carries you over the many things that claw and tear.
Fante's pure and magic emotions hang on the simple clean line.
that this man died one of the slowest and most horrible deaths that I ever witnessed or heard about…
the gods play no favorites.
I put the book down beside me.
book on one side, cat on the other…
John, meeting you, even the way it was was the event of my life. I can't say I would have died for you, I couldn't have handled it that well.
but it was good to see you again this
afternoon.

the pile-up

the 3 horse clipped the heels of the 7, they both went down and the 9 stumbled over them, jocks rolling, horses' legs flung skyward.

then the jocks were up, stunned but all right and I watched the horses rising in the late afternoon, it had not been a good day for me and I watched the horses rise, please, I said inside, no broken legs!

and the 9 was all right and the 7

and the 3 also, they were walking, the horses didn't need the van, the jocks didn't need the ambulance.

what a beautiful day, what a perfectly beautiful day, what a wondrously lovely day— 3 winners in a single race.

my big night on the town

sitting on a 2nd-floor porch at 1:30 a.m.
while
looking out over the city.
it could be worse.
we needn't accomplish great things, we only need to accomplish little things that make us feel better or not so bad.
of course, sometimes the fates will not allow us to do this.
then, we must outwit the fates.
we must be patient with the gods.
they like to have fun, they like to play with us.
they like to test us.
they like to tell us that we are weak and stupid, that we are finished.
the gods need to be amused.
we are their toys.
as I sit on the porch a bird begins to serenade me from a tree nearby in the dark.
it is a mockingbird.
I am in love with mockingbirds.
I make bird sounds.
he waits.
then he makes them back.
he is so good that I laugh.
we are all so easily pleased, all of us living things.
now a slight drizzle begins to fall.
little chill drops fall on my hot skin.
I am half asleep.
I sit in a folding chair with my feet up on the railing as the mockingbird begins to repeat every bird song he has heard that day.
this is what we old guys do for amusement on Saturday
nights:
we laugh at the gods, we settle old scores with

them,
we rejuvenate
as the lights of the city blink below, as the dark tree
holding the mockingbird watches over us, and as the world,
from here,
looks as good as it ever will.

close encounters of another kind

are we going to the movies or not?
she asked him.
all right, he said, let's go.
I'm not going to put any pan ties on so you can finger-fuck me in the dark, she said.
should we get buttered popcorn?
he asked.
sure, she said.
leave your pan ties on, he said.
what is it? she asked.
I just want to watch the movie, he answered.
look, she said, I could go out on the street, there are a hundred men out there who'd be delighted to have me.
all right, he said, go ahead out there.
I'll stay home and read the *National Enquirer.*
you son of a bitch, she said, I am *trying* to build a meaningful relationship.
you can't build it with a hammer, he said.
are we going to the movies or not?
she asked.
all right, he said, let's go…
at the corner of Western and Franklin he put on the blinker to make his left turn and a man in the on-coming lane speeded up as if to cut him off.
brakes grabbed. there wasn't a crash but there almost was one.
he cursed at the man in the other car. the man cursed back. the man had another person in the car with him. it was *his* wife.
they were going to the movies too.

drying out

we buy the scandal sheets at the supermarket get into bed and eat pretzels and read as outside the church bells ring and the dogs bark we turn on the tv and watch very bad movies then she goes down and brings up ice cream and we eat the ice cream and she says, “tomorrow night is trash night.”
then the cat jumps up on the bed drops its tongue out and stands there glistening cross-eyed
the phone rings and it is her mother and she talks to her mother she hands me the phone
I tell her mother that it’s too bad it’s freezing back there it’s about 85 here and,
yes, I’m feeling well and I hope you’re feeling well too
I hand the phone back
she talks some more
then hangs up
“mother is a very brave woman,” she tells me I tell her that I’m sure her mother is
the cat is still standing there glistening cross-eyed I push it down onto the covers
“well,” she says, “we’ve gone two nights without drinking.”
“good,” I say, “but tomorrow night I’m going to do it.”
“ah, come on,” she says
“you don’t have to drink,” I tell her, “just because I do.”
“like hell,” she says
she flips the remote control switch until she comes to a Japanese monster movie
“I think we’ve seen this one,” I say
“you didn’t see it with me,” she says, “who did you see it with?”
“you were laying with me, right here, when we saw it,”
I tell her
“I don’t think I remember this one,” she says
“you just keep watching,” I tell her

we keep watching
I’m not so sure anymore
but it’s a peaceful night as we watch this big thing kick the shit out of half of Tokyo.

scene from 1940:

“I knew you were a bad-ass,” he said.
“you sat in the back of Art class and you never said anything.
then I saw you in that brutal fight with the guy with the dirty yellow hair.
I like guys like you, you’re rare, you’re raw, you make your own rules!”
“get your fucking face out of mine!”
I told him.
“you see?” he said. “you see?”
he disgusted me.
I turned and walked off.
he had outwitted me: praise was the only thing I couldn’t handle.

the area of pause

you have to have it or the walls will close in.
you have to give everything up, throw it away, everything away.
you have to look at what you look at or think what you think or do what you do or don't do
without considering personal advantage without accepting guidance.
people are worn away with striving, they hide in common habits.
their concerns are herd concerns.
few have the ability to stare at an old shoe for ten minutes or to think of odd things like who invented the doorknob?
they become unalive because they are unable to pause undo themselves unkink
unsee
unlearn
roll clear.
listen to their untrue laughter, then walk away.

I know you

you with long hair, legs crossed high, sitting at the end of the bar, you like a butcher knife against my throat as the nightingale sings elsewhere while laughter mingles with the roach's hiss.

I know you as

the piano player in the restaurant who plays badly, his mouth a tiny cesspool and his eyes little wet rolls of toilet paper.

you rode behind me on my bicycle as I pumped toward Venice as a boy, I knew you were there, even in that brisk wind I smelled your breath.

I knew you in the love bed as you whispered lies of passion while your nails dug me into you.

I saw you adored by crowds in Spain while pigtail boys with swords colored the sun for your glory.

I saw you complete the circle of friend, enemy, celebrity and stranger as the fox ran through the sun carrying its heart in its mouth.

those madmen I fought in the back alleys of bars were you.

you, yes, heard Plato's last words.

not too many mornings ago I found my old cat in the yard, dry tongue stuck out awry as if it had never belonged, eyes tangled, eyelids soft yet, I lifted her, daylight shining upon my fingers and her fur, my ignorant existence roaring against the

hedges and the flowers.

I know you, you wait while the fountains gush and the scales weigh, you tiresome daughter-of-a-bitch, come on in, the door is open.

relentless as the tarantula

they’re not going to let you sit at a front table at some cafe in Europe in the mid-afternoon sun.
if you do, somebody’s going to drive by and spray your guts with a submachine gun.
they’re not going to let you feel good for very long anywhere.
the forces aren’t going to let you sit around fucking off and relaxing.
you’ve got to do it their way.
the unhappy, the bitter and the vengeful need their fix—which is you or somebody anybody in agony, or better yet
dead, dropped into some hole.
as long as there are human beings about there is never going to be any peace for any individual upon this earth (or anywhere else they might escape to).
all you can do is maybe grab ten lucky minutes here or maybe an hour there.
something
is working toward you right now, and I mean you and nobody but you.

the replacements

Jack London drinking his life away while writing of strange and heroic men.
Eugene O'Neill drinking himself oblivious while writing his dark and poetic works.
now our moderns lecture at universities in tie and suit, the little boys soberly studious, the little girls with glazed eyes looking up,
the lawns so green, the books so dull, the life so dying of thirst.

to lean back into it

like in a chair the color of the sun as you listen to lazy piano music and the aircraft overhead are not at war.
where the last drink is as good as the first and you realized that the promises you made yourself were kept.
that's plenty.
that last: about the promises: what's not so good is that the few friends you had are dead and they seem irreplaceable.
as for women, you didn't know enough early enough and you knew enough too late.
and if more self-analysis is allowed: it's nice that you turned out well-honed, that you arrived late and remained generally capable.
outside of that, not much to say except you can leave without regret.
until then, a bit more amusement, a bit more endurance,
leaning back
into it.
like the dog who got across the busy street: not all of it was good luck.

eating my senior citizen’s dinner at the Sizzler

between 2 and 5 p.m. any day and any time on Sunday and Wednesday, it’s 20% off for us old dogs approaching the sunset.
it’s strange to be old and not feel old but I glance in the mirror see some silver hair concede that I’d look misplaced at a rock concert.
I eat alone.
the other oldies are in groups, a man and a woman a woman and a woman three old women another man and a woman.
it’s 4:30 p.m. on a Tuesday
and just 5 or 6 blocks north is the cemetery on a long sloping green hill, a very modern place with the markers flat on the ground, it’s much more pleasant for passing traffic.
a young waitress moves among us filling our cups
again with lovely poisonous caffeine.
we thank her and chew on,
some with our own teeth.
we wouldn’t lose much in a nuclear explosion.
one good old boy talks on and on
about what
he’s not too
sure.
well, I finish my meal, leave a tip.
I have the last table by the exit door.
as I’m about to leave I’m blocked by an old girl in a walker followed by another old girl whose back is bent like a bow.
their faces, their arms their hands are like parchment as if they had already been embalmed but they leave quietly.
as I made ready to leave again
I am blocked
this time by a huge wheelchair
the back tilted low it’s almost like a bed, a very expensive mechanism, an awesome and glorious receptacle the chrome glitters and the thick tires are air-inflated and the lady in the

chair and the lady pushing it look alike, sisters no doubt, one's lucky
gets to ride, and they go by again very *white.*
and then
I rise
make it to the door into stunning sunlight make it to the car get in roar the engine into life
rip it into reverse
with a quick back turn of squealing tires I slam to a bouncing halt rip the wheel right feed the gas go from first to second spin into a gap of traffic am quickly into 3rd
4th
I am up to
50 mph in a flash moving through them.
who can turn the stream of destiny?
I light a cigarette punch on the radio and a young girl sings, "put it where it hurts, daddy, make me love you…"

it’s strange

it’s strange when famous people die whether they have fought the good fight or the bad one.
it’s strange when famous people die whether we like them or not they are like old buildings old streets things and places that we are used to which we accept simply because they’re there.
it’s strange when famous people die it’s like the death of a father or a pet cat or dog.
and it’s strange when famous people are killed or when they kill themselves.
the trouble with the famous is that they must be replaced and they can never quite be replaced, and that gives us this unique sadness.
it’s strange when famous people die the sidewalks look different and our children look different and our bedmates and our curtains and our automobiles.
it’s strange when famous people die:
we become troubled.

The Beast

Beowulf may have killed Grendel and Grendel's mother but he couldn't kill this one:

it moves around with broken back and eyes of spittle has cancer sweeps with a broom smiles and kills germs germans gladiolas

it sits in the bathtub with a piece of soap and reads the newspaper about the Bomb and Vietnam and the freeways and it smiles and then gets out naked doesn't use a towel goes outside and rapes young girls kills them and throws them aside like steakbone

it walks into a bedroom and watches lovers fuck it stops the clock at 1:30 a.m.

it turns a man into a rock while he reads a book

the beast

spoils candy

causes mournful songs to be created makes birds stop flying

it even killed Beowulf the brave Beowulf who had killed Grendel and Grendel's mother

look

even the whores at the bar think about it drink too much and almost forget business.

woman on the street

her shoes themselves
would light my room
like many candles.
she walks like all things
shining on glass,
like all things
that make a difference.
she walks away.

lost in San Pedro

no way back to Barcelona.
the green soldiers have invaded the tombs.
madmen rule Spain
and during a heat wave in 1952 I buried my last concubine.
no way back to the Rock of Gibraltar.
the bones of the hands of my mother are so still.
stay still now, mother
stay still.
the horse tossed the jock
the horse fell
then got up
on only 3 legs—
the 4th bent nearly in two and all the people anguished for the jock but my heart ached for the horse the horse the horse
it was terrible
it was truly terrible.
I sometimes think about one or the other of my women.
I wonder what we were hoping for when we lived together our minds shattered like the 4th leg of that horse.
remember when women wore dresses and high heels?
remember whenever a car door opened all the men turned to look?
it was a beautiful time and I'm glad I was there to see it.
no way back to Barcelona.
the world is less than a fishbone.
this place roars with the need for mercy.
there is this fat gold watch sitting here on my desk sent to me by a German cop.
I wrote him a nice letter thanking him for it but the police have killed more of my life than the crooks.
nothing to do but wait for the pulling of the shade.
I pull the shade.
my 3 male cats have had their balls clipped.

now they sit and look at me with eyes emptied of all but killing.

Manx

have we gone wrong again?
we laugh less and less, become more sadly sane.
all we want is the absence of others.
even favorite classical music has been heard too often and all the good books have been read…
there is a sliding glass door and there outside a white Manx sits with one crossed eye his tongue sticks out the corner of his mouth.
I lean over
and pull the door open and he comes running in front legs working in one direction, rear legs in the other.
he circles the room in a scurvy angle to where I sit claws up my legs my chest places front legs like arms
on my shoulders sticks his snout against my nose and looks at me as best he can.
also befuddled, I look back.
a better night now, old boy, a better time, a better way now stuck together like this here.
I am able
to smile again as suddenly the Manx
leaps away
scattering across the rug sideways chasing something now that none of us can see.

the history of a tough motherfucker

he came to the door one night wet thin beaten and terrorized a white cross-eyed tailless cat

I took him in and fed him and he stayed grew to trust me until a friend drove up the driveway and ran him over I took what was left to a vet who said, “not much chance…give him these pills…his backbone is crushed, but it was crushed before and somehow mended, if he lives he’ll never walk, look at these x-rays, he’s been shot, look here, the pellets are still there…also, he once had a tail, somebody cut it off…”

I took the cat back, it was a hot summer, one of the hottest in de cades, I put him on the bathroom floor, gave him water and pills, he wouldn’t eat, he wouldn’t touch the water, I dipped my finger into it and wet his mouth and I talked to him, I didn’t go anywhere, I put in a lot of bathroom time and talked to him and gently touched him and he looked back at me with those pale blue crossed eyes and as the days went by he made his first move dragging himself forward by his front legs (the rear ones wouldn’t work) he made it to the litter box

crawled over and in,

it was like the trumpet of possible victory blowing in that bathroom and into the city, I related to that cat—I’d had it bad, not that bad but bad enough…

one morning he got up, stood up, fell back down and just looked at me.

“you can make it,” I said to him.

he kept trying, getting up and falling down, finally he walked a few steps, he was like a drunk, the rear legs just didn’t want to do it and he fell again, rested, then got up.

you know the rest: now he’s better than ever, cross-eyed, almost toothless, but the grace is back, and that look in his eyes never left…

and now sometimes I’m interviewed, they want to hear about life and literature and I get drunk and hold up my cross-eyed, shot, runover de-tailed cat and I say, “look, look at *this!*”

but they don’t understand, they say something like, “you say you’ve been influenced by Céline?”

“no,” I hold the cat up, “by what happens, by things like this, by this, by *this!*”

I shake the cat, hold him up in

the smoky and drunken light, he’s relaxed he knows…

it’s then that the interviews end

although I am proud sometimes when I see the pictures later and there I am and there is the cat and we are photo-graphed together.

he too knows it’s bullshit but that somehow it all helps.

bad fix

old Butch, they fixed him the girls don't look like much anymore.
when Big Sam moved out of the back I inherited big Butch, 70 as cats go, old, fixed,
but still as big and mean a cat as anybody ever remembered seeing.
he's damn near gnawed off my hand the hand that feeds him a couple of times
but I've forgiven him, he's fixed and there's something in him that doesn't like it.
at night
I hear him mauling and running other cats through the brush.
Butch, he's still a magnificent old cat, fighting
even without it.
what a bastard he must have been with it when he was 19 or 20
walking slowly down his path and I look at him now still feel the courage and the strength in spite of man's smallness in spite of man's scientific skill old Butch
retains
endures
peering at me with those evil yellow eyes out of that huge undefeated head.

one for the old boy

he was just a cat
cross-eyed, a dirty white with pale blue eyes
I won't bore you with his history just to say he had much bad luck and was a good old guy and he died like people die like elephants die like rats die like flowers die like water evaporates and the wind stops blowing
the lungs gave out last Monday.
now he's in the rose garden and I've heard a stirring march playing for him inside of me which I know not many but some of you would like to
know
about.
that's
all.

my cats

I know. I know.
they are limited, have different needs and concerns.
but I watch and learn from them.
I like the little they know, which is so much.
they complain but never worry.
they walk with a surprising dignity.
they sleep with a direct simplicity that humans just can’t understand.
their eyes are more beautiful than our eyes.
and they can sleep 20 hours a day without
hesitation or remorse.
when I am feeling low
all I have to do is watch my cats and my courage
returns.
I study these creatures.
they are my teachers.

Death Wants More Death

death wants more death, and its webs are full: I remember my father's garage, how child-like I would brush the corpses of flies from the windows they had thought were escape— their sticky, ugly, vibrant bodies shouting like dumb crazy dogs against the glass only to spin and flit in that second larger than hell or heaven onto the edge of the ledge, and then the spider from his dank hole nervous and exposed the puff of body swelling hanging there not really quite knowing, and then *knowing*— something sending it down its string, the wet web, toward the weak shield of buzzing, the pulsing; a last desperate moving hair-leg there against the glass there alive in the sun, spun in white;

and almost like love:

the closing over,

the first hushed spider-sucking: filling its sack upon this thing that lived; crouching there upon its back drawing its certain blood as the world goes by outside

and my temples scream

and I hurl the broom against them: the spider dull with spider-anger still thinking of its prey and waving an amazed broken leg; the fly very still, a dirty speck stranded to straw; I shake the killer loose and he walks lame and peeved towards some dark corner but I intercept his dawdling his crawling like some broken hero, and the straws smash his legs now waving above his head

and looking

looking for the enemy

and somehow valiant,

dying without apparent pain simply crawling backward piece by piece leaving nothing there

until at last the red gut-sack splashes its secrets, and I run child-like

with God’s anger a step behind, back to simple sunlight, wondering as the world goes by
with curled smile
if anyone else
saw or sensed my crime.

the lisp

I had her for 3 units and at mid-term she'd read off how many assignments stories had been turned in: "Gilbert: 2…
Ginsing: 5…
McNulty: 4…
Frijoles: none…
Lansford: 2…
Bukowski: 38…"
the class laughed and she lisped that not only did Bukowski write many stories but that they were all of high quality.
she flashed her golden legs in 1940 and there was something sexy about her lisp sexy as a hornet as a rattler that lisp.
and she lisped to me after class that I should go to war, that I would make a very good sailor,
and she told me about how she took my stories home and read them to her husband and how they both laughed, and I told her, "o.k., Mrs. Anderson."
and I'd walk out on the campus where almost every guy had a girl.
I didn't become a sailor, Mrs. Anderson, I'm not crazy about the ocean and I didn't like war even when it was the popular thing to do.
but here's another completed assignment for you those golden legs that lisp still has me typing love songs.

on being 20

my mother knocked on my rooming-house door and came in looked in the dresser drawer: “Henry you don’t have any clean stockings?

do you change your underwear?”

“Mom, I don’t want you poking around in here…”

“I hear that there is a woman who comes to your room late at night and she drinks with you, she lives right down the hall.”

“she’s all right…”

“Henry, you can get a terrible disease.”

“yeah…”

“I talked with your landlady, she’s a nice lady, she says you must read a lot of books in bed because as you fall to sleep at night the books fall to the floor, they can hear it all over the house, heavy books, one at midnight, another at one a.m., another at 2 a.m., another at four.”

after she left I took the library books back returned to the rooming house and put the dirty stockings and the dirty underwear and the dirty shirts into the paper suitcase took the streetcar downtown boarded the Trailways bus to New Orleans figuring to arrive with ten dollars and let them do with me what they would.

they did.

meanwhile

neither does this mean the dead are at the door begging bread before the stockpiles blow like all the storms and hell in one big love, but anyhow I rented a 6 dollar a week room in Chinatown with a window as large as the side of the world filled with night flies and neon, lighted like Broadway to frighten away rats, and I walked into a bar and sat down, and the Chinaman looked at my rags and said no credit and I pulled out a hundred-dollar bill and asked for a cup of Confucius juice and 2 China dolls with slits of eyes just about the size of the rest of them slid closer and we sat and we
waited.

the world's greatest loser

he used to sell papers in front: "Get your winners! Get rich on a dime!"
and about the 3rd or 4th race you'd see him rolling in on his rotten board with roller skates underneath.
he'd propel himself along on his hands; he just had small stumps for legs and the rims of the skate wheels were worn off.
you could see inside the wheels and they would wobble something awful shooting and flashing imperialistic sparks!
he moved faster than anybody, rolled cigarette dangling, you could hear him coming "god o mighty, what was that?" the new ones asked.
he was the world's greatest loser but he never gave up wheeling toward the 2-dollar window screaming: "IT'S THE 4 HORSE, YOU FOOLS! HOW THE HELL YA GONNA BEAT THE
4?"
up on the board the 4 would be reading 60 to 1.
I never heard him pick a winner.
they say he slept in the bushes. I guess that's where he died. he's not around any
more.
there was the big fat blonde whore who kept touching him for luck, and laughing.
nobody had any luck. the whore is gone too.
I guess nothing ever works for us. we're fools, of course—bucking the inside plus a 15 percent take, but how are you going to tell a dreamer there's a 15 percent take on the dream? he'll just laugh and say, is that all?
I miss those
sparks.

human nature

it has been going on for some time.
there is this young waitress where I get my coffee at the racetrack.
"how are you doing today?" she asks.
"winning pretty good," I reply.
"you won yesterday, didn't you?" she asks.
"yes," I say, "and the day before."
I don't know exactly what it is but I believe we must have incompatible personalities. there is often a hostile undertone to our conversations.
"you seem to be the only person around here who keeps winning,"
she says, not looking at me, not pleased.
"is that so?" I answer.
there is something very strange about all this: whenever I do lose she never seems to be there.
perhaps it's her day off or sometimes she works another counter?
she bets too and loses.
she always loses.
and even though we might have incompatible personalities I am sorry for
her.
I decide the next time I see her I will tell her that I am losing.
so I do.
when she asks, "how are you doing?"
I say, "god, I don't understand it, I'm losing, I can't hit anything, every horse I bet runs last!"
"really?" she asks.
"really," I say.
it works.
she lowers her gaze

and here comes one of the largest smiles I have ever seen, it damn near cracks her face wide open.
I get my coffee, tip her well, walk out to check the toteboard.
if I died in a flaming crash on the freeway she'd surely be happy for a week!
I take a sip of coffee.
what's this?
she's put in a large shot of cream!
she knows I like it black!
in her excitement,
she'd forgotten.
the bitch.
and that's what I get for lying.

the trash men

here they come
these guys
gray truck
radio playing
they are in a hurry
it’s quite exciting: shirt open bellies hanging out
they run out the trash bins roll them out to the fork lift and then the truck grinds it upward with far too much sound…
they had to fill out application forms to get these jobs they are paying for homes and drive late model cars
they get drunk on Saturday night
now in the Los Angeles sunshine they run back and forth with their trash bins
all that trash goes somewhere
and they shout to each other
then they are all up in the truck driving west toward the sea
none of them know that I am alive
REX DISPOSAL CO.

a gold pocket watch

my grandfather was a tall German with a strange smell on his breath.
he stood very straight in front of his small house and his wife hated him and his children thought him odd.
I was six the first time we met and he gave me all his war medals.
the second time I met him he gave me his gold pocket watch.
it was very heavy and I took it home and wound it very tight and it stopped running which made me feel bad.
I never saw him again and my parents never spoke of him nor did my grandmother who had long ago stopped living with him.
once I asked about him and they told me he drank too much
but I liked him best
standing very straight in front of his house and saying, “hello, Henry, you and I, we know each other.”

talking to my mailbox…

boy, don't come around here telling me you can't cut it, that they're pitching you low and inside, that they are conspiring against you, that all you want is a chance but they won't give you a chance.
boy, the problem is that you're not doing what you want to do, or if you're doing what you want to do, you're just not doing it well.
boy, I agree:
there's not much opportunity, and there are some at the top who are not doing much better than you are but
you're wasting energy haranguing and bitching.
boy, I'm not *advising,* just suggesting that instead of sending your poems to me along with your letters of complaint you should enter the arena— send your work to the editors and publishers, it will
buck up your backbone and your versatility.
boy, I wish to thank you for the praise for some of my published works but that has nothing to do with anything and won't help a purple shit, you've just got to learn to hit that low, hard inside pitch.
this is a form letter I send to almost everybody, but I hope you take it personally, man.

I liked him

I liked D. H. Lawrence he could get so indignant he snapped and he ripped with wonderfully energetic sentences he could lay the word down bright and writhing there was the stink of blood and murder and sacrifice about him the only tenderness he allowed was when he bedded down his large German wife.
I liked D. H. Lawrence— he could talk about Christ like he was the man next door and he could describe Australian taxi drivers so well you hated them I liked D. H. Lawrence but I'm glad I never met him in some bistro him lifting his tiny hot cup of tea and looking at me
with his worm-hole eyes.

one for the shoeshine man

the balance is preserved by the snails climbing the Santa Monica cliffs; the luck is in walking down Western Avenue and having the girls in a massage parlor holler at you, “Hello, Sweetie!”

the miracle is having 5 women in love with you at the age of 55, and the goodness is that you are only able to love one of them.

the gift is having a daughter more gentle than you are, whose laughter is finer than yours.

the peace comes from driving a blue 67 Volks through the streets like a teenager, radio tuned to The Host Who Loves You Most, feeling the sun, feeling the solid hum of the rebuilt motor as you needle through traffic.

the grace is being able to like rock music, symphony music, jazz…anything that contains the original energy of joy.

and the probability that returns is the deep blue low yourself flat upon yourself within the guillotine walls angry at the sound of the phone or anybody’s footsteps passing; but the other probability— the lilting high that always follows— makes the girl at the checkstand in the

supermarket look like Marilyn like Jackie before they got her Harvard lover like the girl in high school that we all followed home.

there is that which helps you believe in something else besides death: somebody in a car approaching on a street too narrow, and he or she pulls aside to let you by, or the old fighter Beau Jack shining shoes after blowing the entire bankroll on parties on women

on parasites,

humming, breathing on the leather, working the rag looking up and saying: “what the hell, I had it for a while. that beats the other.”

I am bitter sometimes but the taste has often been sweet. it's only that I've feared to say it. it's like when your woman says, "tell me you love me," and you can't.

if you see me grinning from my blue Volks running a yellow light driving straight into the sun I will be locked in the arms of a crazy life

thinking of trapeze artists of midgets with big cigars of a Russian winter in the early 40s of Chopin with his bag of Polish soil of an old waitress bringing me an extra cup of coffee and laughing as she does so.

the best of you

I like more than you think.

the others don't count except that they have fingers and heads and some of them eyes and most of them legs and all of them

good and bad dreams

and a way to go.

justice is everywhere and it's working and the machine guns and the frogs and the hedges will tell you so.

the proud thin dying

I see old people on pensions in the supermarkets and they are thin and they are proud and they are dying they are starving on their feet and saying nothing. long ago, among other lies, they were taught that silence was bravery. now, having worked a lifetime, inflation has trapped them. they look around steal a grape chew on it. finally they make a tiny purchase, a day's worth.

another lie they were taught: thou shalt not steal.

they'd rather starve than steal (one grape won't save them) and in tiny rooms while reading the market ads they'll starve they'll die without a sound pulled out of rooming houses by young blond boys with long hair who'll slide them in and pull away from the curb, these boys handsome of eye

thinking of Vegas and pussy and victory.

it's the order of things: each one gets a taste of honey then the knife.

shot of red-eye

I used to hold my social security card up in the air, he told me,
but I was so small they couldn't see it, all those big guys around.
you mean the place with the big green screen?
I asked.
yeah. well, anyhow, I finally got on the other day picking tomatoes, and Jesus Christ, I couldn't get anywhere it was too hot, too hot and I couldn't get anything in my sack so I lay under the truck in the shade and drank wine. I didn't make a dime.
have a drink, I said.
sure, he said.
two big women came in and I mean BIG
and they sat next to us.
shot of red-eye, one of them said to the bartender.
likewise, said the other.
they pulled their dresses up around their hips and swung their legs.
um, umm. I think I'm going mad, I told my friend from the tomato fields.
Jesus, he said, Jesus and Mary, I can't believe what I see.
it's all
there, I said.
you a fighter? the one next to me asked.
no, I said.
what happened to your face?
automobile accident on the San Berdoo freeway. some drunk jumped the divider. I was the drunk.
how old *are* you, daddy?
old enough to slice the melon, I said, tapping my cigar ashes into my beer to give me strength.
can you buy a melon? she asked.
have you ever been chased across the Mojave and raped?

no, she said.

I pulled out my last 20 and with an old man's virile abandon ordered four drinks.

both girls smiled and pulled their dresses higher, if that was possible.

who's your friend? they asked.

this is Lord Chesterfield, I told them.

pleased ta meetcha, they said.

hello, bitches, he answered.

we walked through the 3rd street tunnel to a green hotel. the girls had a key.

there was one bed and we all got in. I don't know who got who.

the next morning my friend and I were down at the Farm Labor Market on San Pedro Street holding up and waving our social security cards.

they couldn't see

his.

I was the last one on the truck out. a big woman stood up against me. she smelled like port wine.

honey, she asked, what ever happened to your face?

fair grounds, a dancing bear who didn't.

bullshit, she said.

maybe so, I said, but get your hand out from around my balls. everybody's looking.

when we got to the fields the sun was really up and the world

looked

terrible.

about pain

my first and only wife painted and she talked to me about it:
"it's all so *painful* for me, each stroke is *pain*…
one mistake and the whole painting is *ruined*…
you will *never* understand the *pain*…"
"look, baby," I said, "why doncha do something easy—something ya like ta do?"
she just looked at me and I think it was her first understanding of the tragedy of our being together.
such things usually begin
somewhere.

hot

she was hot, she was so hot I didn't want anybody else to have her, and if I didn't get home on time she'd be gone, and I couldn't bear that— I'd go mad…

it was foolish I know, childish, but I was caught in it, I was caught.

I delivered all the mail and then Henderson put me on the night pickup run in an old army truck, the damn thing began to heat halfway through the run and the night went on me thinking about my hot Miriam and jumping in and out of the truck filling mailsacks the engine continuing to heat up the temperature needle was at the top HOT HOT

like Miriam.

I leaped in and out

3 more pickups and into the station I'd be, my car waiting to get me to Miriam who sat on my blue couch with scotch on the rocks crossing her legs and swinging her ankles like she did, 2 more stops…

the truck stalled at a traffic light, it was hell kicking it over again…

I had to be home by 8, 8 was the deadline for Miriam.

I made the last pickup and the truck stalled at a signal $^1/_2$ block from the station…

it wouldn't start, it couldn't start…

I locked the doors, pulled the key and ran down to the station…

I threw the keys down…. signed out…

your goddamned truck is stalled at the signal, I shouted, Pico and Western…

…I ran down the hall, put the key into the door, opened it…. her drinking glass was there, and a note:

sun of a bitch: I wated until 5 after ate you don't love me you sun of a bitch

somebody will love me I been wateing all day

Miriam

I poured a drink and let the water run into the tub there were 5,000 bars in town and I’d make 25 of them looking for Miriam

her purple teddy bear held the note as he leaned against a pillow

I gave the bear a drink, myself a drink and got into the hot water.

who in the hell is Tom Jones?

I was shacked with a 24-year-old girl from New York City for two weeks—about
the time of the garbage strike out there, and one night my 34-year-old woman arrived and she said, “I want to see my rival.” she did and then she said, “o, you’re a cute little thing!”
next I knew there was a screech of wildcats— such screaming and scratching, wounded animal moans, blood and piss…
I was drunk and in my shorts. I tried to separate them and fell, wrenched my knee. then they were through the screen door and down the walk and out in the street.
squad cars full of cops arrived. a police helicopter circled overhead.
I stood in the bathroom and grinned in the mirror.
it’s not often at the age of 55 that such splendid things occur.
better than the Watts riots.
the 34-year-old
came back in. she had pissed all over her-self and her clothing was torn and she was followed by 2 cops who wanted to know why.
pulling up my shorts I tried to explain.

the price

drinking 15-dollar champagne— *Cordon Rouge*—with the hookers.

one is named Georgia and she doesn't like pantyhose: I keep helping her pull up her long dark stockings.

the other is Pam—prettier but not much soul, and we smoke and talk and I play with their legs and stick my bare foot into Georgia's open purse.

it's filled with

bottles of pills. I take some of the pills.

"listen," I say, "one of you has soul, the other looks. can't I combine the 2 of you? take the soul and stick it into the looks?"

"you want me," says Pam, "it will cost you a hundred."

we drink some more and Georgia falls to the floor and can't get up.

I tell Pam that I like her earrings very much. her hair is long and a natural red.

"I was only kidding about the hundred," she says.

"oh," I say, "what will it cost me?"

she lights her cigarette with my lighter and looks at me through the flame:

her eyes tell me.

"look," I say, "I don't think I can ever pay that price again."

she crosses her legs inhales on her cigarette

as she exhales she smiles and says, "sure you can."

I’m in love

she’s young, she said, but look at me, I have pretty ankles, and look at my wrists, I have pretty wrists o my god,

I thought it was all working, and now it’s her again, every time she phones you go crazy, you told me it was over you told me it was finished, listen, I’ve lived long enough to become a good woman, why do you need a bad woman?

you need to be tortured, don’t you?

you think life is rotten if somebody treats you rotten it all fits, doesn’t it?

tell me, is that it? do you want to be treated like a piece of shit?

and my son, my son was going to meet you.

I told my son

and I dropped all my lovers.

I stood up in a cafe and screamed I’M IN LOVE, and now you’ve made a fool of me…

I’m sorry, I said, I’m really sorry.

hold me, she said, will you please hold me?

I’ve never been in one of these things before, I said, these triangles…

she got up and lit a cigarette, she was trembling all over. she paced up and down, wild and crazy. she had a small body. her arms were thin, very thin and when she screamed and started beating me I held her wrists and then I got it through the eyes: hatred, centuries deep and true. I was wrong and graceless and sick. all the things I had learned had been wasted.

there was no living creature as foul as I and all my poems were false.

the girls

I have been looking at the same lampshade for
5 years
and it has gathered a bachelor's dust and the girls who enter here are too busy to clean it
but I don't mind I have been too busy to notice until now
that the light shines badly
through 5 years'
worth.

the ladies of summer

the ladies of summer will die like the rose and the lie
the ladies of summer will love so long as the price is not forever
the ladies of summer might love anybody; they might even love you as long as summer lasts
yet winter will come to them too
white snow and a cold freezing and faces so ugly that even death will turn away— wince— before taking them.

tonight

"your poems about the girls will still be around 50 years from now when the girls are gone,"
my editor phones me.
dear editor:
the girls appear to be gone already.
I know what you mean
but give me one truly alive woman to night walking across the floor toward me
and you can have all the poems
the good ones
the bad ones
or any that I might write after this one.
I know what you mean.
do you know what I mean?

shoes

when you’re young
a pair of
female
high-heeled shoes
just sitting
alone
in the closet
can fire your
bones;
when you’re old
it’s just
a pair of shoes
without
anybody
in them
and
just as
well.

hug the dark

turmoil is the god madness is the god
permanent living peace is permanent living death.
agony can kill or agony can sustain life but peace is always horrifying peace is the worst thing walking talking
smiling,
seeming to be.
don’t forget the sidewalks the whores, betrayal,
the worm in the apple, the bars, the jails, the suicides of lovers.
here in America we have assassinated a president and his brother, another president has quit office.
people who believe in politics are like people who believe in god: they are sucking wind through bent straws.
there is no god there are no politics there is no peace there is no love there is no control there is no plan
stay away from god remain disturbed
slide.

face of a political candidate on a street billboard

there he is: not too many hangovers not too many fights with women not too many flat tires never a thought of suicide
not more than three toothaches never missed a meal never in jail never in love
7 pairs of shoes
a son in college
a car one year old
insurance policies
a very green lawn
garbage cans with tight lids
he'll be elected.

white dog

I went for a walk on Hollywood Boulevard.
I looked down and there was a large white dog walking beside me.
his pace was exactly the same as mine.
we stopped at traffic signals together.
we crossed the side streets together.
a woman smiled at us.
he must have walked 8 blocks with me.
then I went into a grocery store and when I came out he was gone.
or she was gone.
the wonderful white dog with a trace of yellow in its fur.
the large blue eyes were gone.
the grinning mouth was gone.
the lolling tongue was gone.
things are so easily lost.
things just can’t be kept forever.
I got the blues.
I got the blues.
that dog loved and
trusted me and
I let it walk away.

on going out to get the mail

the droll noon
where squadrons of worms creep up like stripteasers to be raped by blackbirds.
I go outside
and all up and down the street the green armies shoot color like an everlasting 4th of July, and I too seem to swell inside, a kind of unknown bursting, a feeling, perhaps, that there isn't any enemy anywhere.
and I reach down into the box and there is nothing—not even a letter from the gas co. saying they will shut it off again.
not even a short note from my x-wife bragging about her present happiness.
my hand searches the mailbox in a kind of disbelief long after the mind has given up.
there's not even a dead fly down in there.
I am a fool, I think, I should have known it works like this.
I go inside as all the flowers leap to please me.
anything? the woman asks.
nothing, I answer, what's for breakfast?

spring swan

swans die in the Spring too and there it floated dead on a Sunday sideways circling in the current and I walked to the rotunda and overhead gods in chariots dogs, women circled,

and death

ran down my throat like a mouse, and I heard the people coming with their picnic bags and laughter, and I felt guilty for the swan as if death

were a thing of shame and like a fool I walked away and left them my beautiful swan.

how is your heart?

during my worst times on the park benches in the jails or living with whores I always had this certain contentment— I wouldn't call it happiness— it was more of an inner balance that settled for whatever was occurring and it helped in the factories and when relationships went wrong with the
girls.
it helped
through the wars and the hangovers the backalley fights the hospitals.
to awaken in a cheap room in a strange city and pull up the shade—
this was the craziest kind of contentment
and to walk across the floor to an old dresser with a cracked mirror— see myself, ugly, grinning at it all.
what matters most is how well you walk through the fire.

closing time

around 2 a.m.
in my small room after turning off the poem machine for now
I continue to light cigarettes and listen to Beethoven on the radio.
I listen with a strange and lazy aplomb, knowing there's still a poem or two left to write, and I feel damn fine, at long last, as once again I admire the verve and gamble of this composer now dead for over 100
years,
who's younger and wilder than you are than I am.
the centuries are sprinkled with rare magic with divine creatures who help us get past the common and
extraordinary ills that beset us.
I light the next to last cigarette remember all the 2 a.m.s of my past, put out of the bars at closing time, put out on the streets (a ragged band of solitary lonely humans we were)
each walking home alone.
this is much better: living where I now live and listening to the reassurance the kindness of this unexpected SYMPHONY OF TRIUMPH: a new life.

racetrack parking lot at the end of the day

I watch them push the crippled and the infirm in their wheelchairs on to the electric lift
which carries them up into the long bus where each chair is locked down and each person has a window of their own.
they are all white-skinned, like pale paint on thin cardboard; most of them are truly old; there are a number of women, a few old men, and 3 surprisingly young men 2 of whom wear neck braces that *gleam* in the late afternoon sun and all 3 with arms as thin as rope and hands that resemble clenched claws.
the caretaker seems very kind, very understanding, he's a marvelous fat fellow with a rectangular head and he wears a broad smile which is not false.
the old women are either extremely thin or overweight.
most have humped backs and shoulders and wispy very straight
white hair.
they sit motionless, look straight ahead as the electric lift raises them
on to the bus.
there is no conversation;
they appear calm and not embittered by their plight. both men and women are soon loaded on to the waiting bus except for the last one, a very old man, almost skeletal, with a tiny round head, completely bald, a shining white dot against the late afternoon sky, waving a cane above his head as he is pushed shouting on to the electric lift: "WELL, THEY ROBBED OUR ASSES
AGAIN, CLEANED US OUT, WE'RE A BUNCH OF SUCKERS TOTTERING ON THE EDGE OF OUR GRAVES AND WE LET THEM TAKE
OUR LAST PENNY AGAIN!
" as he speaks
he waves the cane above his head and cracks the marvelous fat fellow who is pushing his chair, cracks the cane against the side

of the caretaker's head.

it's a mighty blow and

the attendant staggers, grabs hard at the back of the wheelchairas

the old man yells: "OH, JERRY, I'M SORRY, I'M SO SORRY, WHAT CAN I DO? WHAT

CAN I DO?"

Jerry steadies himself, he is not badly hurt.

it's a small concussion but within an hour he will possess a knot the size of an apricot.

"it's all right, Sandy, only I've told you again and again, please be careful with that damned cane…"

Sandy is pushed on to the electric lift, it rises and he disappears into the bus's dark interior.

then Jerry climbs slowly into the bus, takes the wheel, starts up, the door closes with a hiss, the bus begins to move to the exit, and on the back of the vehicle in bold white letters on dark blue background

I see the words:

HARBOR HOME OF LOVE.

there

the centerfielder
turns
rushes back
reaches up his glove
and
snares the
ball,
we are all him for
that moment,
sucking the air
into our
gut.
as the crowd roars like
crazy
we rifle the ball back
through the
miraculous
air.

Dinosauria, we

born like this
into this
as the chalk faces smile as Mrs. Death laughs as the elevators break as political landscapes dissolve as the supermarket bag boy holds a college degree as the oily fish spit out their oily prey as the sun is masked
we are
born like this
into this
into these carefully mad wars into the sight of broken factory windows of emptiness into bars where people no longer speak to each other into fist fights that end as shootings and knifings
born into this
into hospitals which are so expensive that it’s cheaper to die into lawyers who charge so much it’s cheaper to plead guilty into a country where the jails are full and the mad houses closed into a place where the masses elevate fools into rich heroes
born into this
walking and living through this dying because of this muted because of this castrated
debauched
disinherited
because of this
fooled by this
used by this
pissed on by this
made crazy and sick by this made violent made inhuman
by this
the heart is blackened the fingers reach for the throat the gun the knife
the bomb
the fingers reach toward an unresponsive god

the fingers reach for the bottle the pill the powder

we are born into this sorrowful deadliness we are born into a government 60 years in debt that soon will be unable to even pay the interest on that debt and the banks will burn money will be useless there will be open and unpunished murder in the streets it will be guns and roving mobs land will be useless food will become a diminishing return nuclear power will be taken over by the many explosions will continually shake the earth

radiated robot men will stalk each other the rich and the chosen will watch from space platforms Dante's Inferno will be made to look like a children's playground

the sun will not be seen and it will always be night trees will die all vegetation will die radiated men will eat the flesh of radiated men the sea will be poisoned the lakes and rivers will vanish rain will be the new gold

the rotting bodies of men and animals will stink in the dark wind

the last few survivors will be overtaken by new and hideous diseases and the space platforms will be destroyed by attrition the petering out of supplies the natural effect of general decay

and there will be the most beautiful silence never heard

born out of that.

the sun still hidden there awaiting the next chapter.

mind and heart

unaccountably we are alone forever alone and it was meant to be that way, it was never meant to be any other way— and when the death struggle begins the last thing I wish to see is a ring of human faces hovering over me— better just my old friends, the walls of my self, let only them be there.
I have been alone but seldom lonely.
I have satisfied my thirst at the well of my self
and that wine was good, the best I ever had, and to night sitting staring into the dark I now finally understand the dark and the light and everything in between.
peace of mind and heart arrives when we accept what is: having been
born into this strange life we must accept the wasted gamble of our days and take some satisfaction in the pleasure of leaving it all behind.
cry not for me.
grieve not for me.
read
what I’ve written then forget it
all.
drink from the well of your self and begin again.

TB

I had it for a year, really put in a lot of bedroom time, slept upright on two pillows to keep from coughing, all the blood drained from my head and often I'd awaken to find myself slipping sideways off the bed.
since my TB was contagious I didn't have any visitors and the phone stopped ringing and that was the lucky part.
during the day I tried TV and food, neither of which went down very well.
the soap operas and the talk shows were a daytime nightmare, so for the lack of anything else to do I watched the baseball games
and led the Dodgers to a pennant.
not much else for me to do except take antibiotics and the cough medicine.
I also really saved putting mileage on the car and missed the hell out of
the old race
track.
you realize when you're plucked out of the mainstream that it doesn't need you or anybody else.
the birds don't notice you're gone, the flowers don't care, the people out there don't notice, but the IRS, the phone co., the gas and electric co., the DMV, etc., they keep in touch.
being very sick and being dead are very much the same in society's eye.
either way,
you might just as well lay back and enjoy it.

crime does pay

the rooms at the hospital went for $550 a day.
that was for the room alone.
the amazing thing, though, was that in some of the rooms prisoners were lodged.
I saw them chained to their beds, usually by an ankle.
$550 a day, plus meals, now that's luxury living—plus first-rate medical attention and two guards on watch.
and here I was with my cancer, walking down the halls in my robe thinking, if I live through this it will take me years to pay off the hospital while the prisoners won't owe a damned thing.
not that I didn't have some sympathy for those fellows but when you consider that when something like a bullet in one of your buttocks gets you all that free attention, medical and otherwise,
plus no billing later from the hospital business office, maybe I had chosen the wrong occupation?

the orderly

I am sitting on a tin chair outside the x-ray lab as death, on stinking wings, wafts through the halls forevermore.
I remember the hospital stenches from when I was a boy and when I was a man and now as an old man I sit in my tin chair waiting.
then an orderly
a young man of 23 or 24
pushes in a piece of equipment.
it looks like a hamper of freshly done laundry but I can't be sure.
the orderly is awkward.
he is not deformed
but his legs work
in an unruly fashion as if disassociated from the motor workings of the brain.
he is in blue, dressed all in blue, pushing, pushing his load.
ungainly little boy blue.
then he turns his head and yells at the receptionist at the x-ray window: "anybody wants me, I'll be in 76
for about 20 minutes!"
his face reddens as he yells, his mouth forms a down turned crescent like a pumpkin's halloween mouth.
then he's gone into some doorway, probably 76.
not a very *prepossessing* chap.
lost as a human,
long gone down some numbing road.
but
he's healthy
he's healthy.
HE'S HEALTHY!

the nurses

at the hospital that I have been going to the nurses seem overweight.
they are bulky in their white dresses fat above the hips and down through the buttocks to the heavy legs.
they all appear to be 47 years old, walk wide-legged like the old fullbacks of the 1930s.
they seem distanced from their profession.
they attend to their duties but with a lack of
contact.
I pass them in the walkways and in the
corridors.
they never look into my eyes.
I forgive them their heavy-shoed walk, for the space that they must forge between themselves and each patient.
for these ladies are truly over-fed:
they have seen too much
death.

cancer

half-past nowhere
alone
in the crumbling
tower of myself
stumbling in this the
darkest
hour
the last gamble has been
lost
as I
reach
for
bone
silence.

first poem back

64 days and nights in that place, chemotherapy, antibiotics, blood running into the catheter.
leukemia.
who, me?
at age 72 I had this foolish thought that I'd just die peacefully in my sleep but the gods want it their way.
I sit at this machine, shattered, half alive, still seeking the Muse, but I am back for the moment only; while nothing seems the same.
I am not reborn, only chasing a few more days, a few more nights, like this
one.

tired in the afterdusk

smoking a cigarette and noting a mosquito who has flattened out against the wall and died as organ music from centuries back plays through my black radio as downstairs my wife watches a rented video on the VCR.

this is the space between spaces, this is when the ever-war relents for just a moment, this is when you consider the inconsiderate years: the fight has been wearing…but, at times, interesting, such as resting quietly here in the afterdusk as the sound of the centuries run through my body…

this

old dog resting in the shade peaceful but ready.

again

now the territory is taken, the sacrificial lambs have been slain, as history is scratched again on the sallow walls, as the bankers scurry to survive, as the young girls paint their hungry lips, as the dogs sleep in temporary peace, as the shadow gets ready to fall, as the oceans gobble the poisons of man, as heaven and hell dance in the anteroom, it's begin again and go again, it's bake the apple, buy the car, mow the lawn,

pay the tax,

hang the toilet paper, clip the nails, listen to the crickets, blow up the balloons, drink the orange juice, forget the past, pass the mustard, pull down the shades, take the pills, check the air in the tires, lace on the gloves, the bell is ringing, the pearl is in the oyster, the rain falls as the shadow gets ready to fall again.

so now?

the words have come and gone, I sit ill.
the phone rings, the cats sleep.
Linda vacuums.
I am waiting to live, waiting to die.
I wish I could ring in some bravery.
it's a lousy fix but the tree outside doesn't know: I watch it moving with the wind in the late afternoon sun.
there's nothing to declare here, just a waiting.
each faces it alone.
Oh, I was once young, Oh, I was once unbelievably young!

blue

blue fish, the blue night, a blue knife— everything is blue.
and my cats are blue: blue fur, blue claws, blue whiskers, blue eyes.
my bed lamp shines blue.
inside, my blue heart pumps blue blood.
my fingernails, my toenails are blue
and around my bed floats a blue ghost.
even the taste inside my mouth is blue.
and I am alone and dying and blue.

a summation

more wasted days, gored days, evaporated days.

more squandered days, days pissed away, days slapped around, mutilated.

the problem is that the days add up to a life, my life.

I sit here 73 years old knowing I have been badly fooled, picking at my teeth with a toothpick which breaks.

dying should come easy: like a freight train you don’t hear when your back is turned.

sun coming down

no one is sorry I am leaving, not even I; but there should be a minstrel or at least a glass of wine.
it bothers the young most, I think: an unviolent slow death.
still it makes any man dream; you wish for an old sailing ship, the white salt-crusted sail and the sea shaking out hints of immortality.
sea in the nose
sea in the hair
sea in the marrow, in the eyes and yes, there in the chest.
will we miss
the love of a woman or music or food or the gambol of the great mad muscled horse, kicking clods and destinies high and away in just one moment of the sun coming down?
but now it's my turn
and there's no majesty in it because there was no majesty before it and each of us, like worms bitten out of apples, deserves no reprieve.
death enters my mouth
and snakes along my teeth and I wonder if I am frightened of this voiceless, unsorrowful dying that is like the drying of a rose?

twilight musings

the drifting of the mind.
the slow loss, the leaking away.
one's demise is not very interesting.
from my bed I watch 3 birds through the east window: one coal black, one dark brown, the other yellow.
as night falls I watch the red lights on the bridge blink on and off.
I am stretched out in bed with the covers up to my chin.
I have no idea who won at the racetrack today.
I must go back into the hospital tomorrow.
why me?
why not?

my last winter

I see this final storm as nothing very serious in the sight of the world; there are so many more important things to worry about and to consider.
I see this final storm as nothing very special in the sight of the world and it shouldn’t be thought of as special.
other storms have been much greater, more dramatic.
I see this final storm approaching and calmly my mind waits.
I see this final storm as nothing very serious in the sight of the world.
the world and I have seldom agreed on most matters but now we can agree.
so bring it on, bring on this final storm.
I have patiently waited for too long now.

like a dolphin

dying has its rough edge.
no escaping now.
the warden has his eye on me.
his bad eye.
I'm doing hard time now.
in solitary.
locked down.
I'm not the first nor the last.
I'm just telling you how it is.
I sit in my own shadow now.
the face of the people grows dim.
the old songs still play.
hand to my chin, I dream of nothing while my lost childhood
leaps like a dolphin in the frozen sea.

the bluebird

there’s a bluebird in my heart that wants to get out but I’m too tough for him, I say, stay in there, I’m not going to let anybody see you.
there’s a bluebird in my heart that wants to get out but I pour whiskey on him and inhale cigarette smoke and the whores and the bartenders and the grocery clerks never know that he’s in there.
there’s a bluebird in my heart that wants to get out but I’m too tough for him I say, stay down, do you want to mess me up?
you want to screw up the works?
you want to blow my book sales in Europe?
there’s a bluebird in my heart that wants to get out but I’m too clever, I only let him out at night sometimes
when everybody’s asleep.
I say, I know that you’re there, so don’t be sad.
then I put him back, but he’s singing a little in there, I haven’t quite let him die and we sleep together like that with our
secret pact
and it’s nice enough to make a man weep, but I don’t weep, do you?

if we take—

if we take what we can see— the engines driving us mad, lovers finally hating; this fish in the market

staring upward into our minds; flowers rotting, flies web-caught; riots, roars of caged lions, clowns in love with dollar bills, nations moving people like pawns; daylight thieves with beautiful nighttime wives and wines; the crowded jails, the commonplace unemployed, dying grass, 2-bit fires; men old enough to love the grave.

These things, and others, in content show life swinging on a rotten axis.

But they've left us a bit of music and a spiked show in the corner, a jigger of scotch, a blue necktie, a small volume of poems by Rimbaud, a horse running as if the devil were twisting his tail over bluegrass and screaming, and then, love again like a streetcar turning the corner on time

the city waiting,

the wine and the flowers, the water walking across the lake and summer and winter and summer and summer and winter again.

alphabetical index of poem titles

about competition (*sifting through the madness…*) about pain (*War All the Time* about the PEN conference (*You Get So Alone at Times That It Just Makes Sense*) advice for some young man in the year 2064 A.D. (*uncollected*) afternoons into night (*uncollected*) again (*Betting on the Muse*) American Flag Shirt, the (*The People Look Like Flowers at Last*) an empire of coins (*Betting on the Muse*) angel who pushed his wheelchair, the (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) area of pause, the (*The Last Night of the Earth Poems*) art (*play the piano drunk…*) bad fix (*Dangling in the Tournefortia*) bakers of 1935, the (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) bang bang (*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) barfly (*The Flash of Lightning Behind the Mountain*) batting slump (*Open All Night*) beagle (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) Beast, The (*The Rooming house Madrigals*) beautiful lady, the (*Bone Palace Ballet*) big one, the (*Bone Palace Ballet*) big time loser (*Open All Night*) birds, the (*The Flash of Lightning Behind the Mountain*) blue (*Come On In!*) blue beads and bones (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) bluebird, the (*The Last Night of the Earth Poems*) bow wow love (*uncollected*) boy and his dog, a (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) 247 Bruckner (2) (*Open All Night*) burning of the dream, the (*Septuagenarian Stew*) butterflies (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) cancer (*Come On In!*) car wash (*The Last Night of the Earth Poems*) Carson McCullers (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) clean well-lighted place, a (*Slouching Toward Nirvana*) close encounters of another kind (*play the piano drunk…*) closing time (*Come On In!*) coffee and babies (*uncollected*) colored birds, the (*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) come on in! (*Come On In!*) commerce (*sifting through the madness…*) crime does pay (*The Flash of Lightning Behind the Mountain*) crucifix in a deathhand (*Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame*) crunch, the (*Love Is a Dog from Hell*) dark night poem (*uncollected*) day the epileptic spoke, the (*War All the Time*) Death Wants More Death (*The Rooming house Madrigals*) Democracy (*The Flash of Lightning Behind the Mountain*) Destroying Beauty (*The Rooming house Madrigals*) Dinosauria, we (*The Last Night of the Earth Poems*) downtown (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) dreaming (*uncollected*) drowning, the (*uncollected*) drying out (*Dangling in the Tournefortia*) eating my senior citizen's dinner at the Sizzler (*War All the Time*) eat your heart out (*Love Is a Dog from Hell*) egg, the (*play the piano drunk…*) –1883 (*You Get So Alone at Times That It Just Makes Sense*)131 elephants in the zoo (*uncollected*) elephants of Vietnam, the (*The People Look Like Flowers at Last*) eulogy (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) eulogy to a hell of a dame (*War All the Time*) face of a political candidate on a street billboard (*play the piano drunk…*) finish (*The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*) first poem back (*The Flash of Lightning Behind the Mountain*) fisherman, the (*Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame*) fooling Marie (the poem) (*Come On In!*) for Jane (*The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*) for Jane: with all the love I had, which was not enough: (*The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*) for they had things to say (*The People Look Like Flowers at Last*) free 25-page booklet, a (*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) fun house (*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) future congressman, a (*The People Look Like Flowers at Last*) Genius of the Crowd, The (*The Rooming house Madrigals*) genius, the (*The Last Night of the Earth Poems*) German bar (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) girl in a mini skirt reading the Bible outside my window (*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) girl on the escalator (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) girl outside the supermarket, the (*uncollected*) girls and the birds, the (*Septuagenarian Stew*) girls at the green hotel, the (*Love Is a Dog from Hell*) girls, the (*Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame*) gold in your eye (*Septuagenarian Stew*) gold pocket watch, a (*Love Is a Dog from Hell*) Goldfish (*The Rooming house Madrigals*) grass (*Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame*) great escape, the (*sifting* *through the madness…*) great writer, a (*The People Look Like Flowers at Last*) ha ha ha ha ha, ha ha (*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) harbor freeway south (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) harder you try, the (*The People Look Like Flowers at Last*) hell is a lonely place (*Septuagenarian Stew*) hello, how are you? (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) High-Rise of the New World, The (*The Rooming house Madrigals*) history of a tough motherfucker, the (*War All the Time*) his wife, the painter (*The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*) hot (*Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame*) how is your heart? (*You Get So Alone at Times That It Just Makes Sense*) hug the dark (*play the plano drunk…*) human nature (*The Flash of Lightning Behind the Mountain*) I am eaten by butterflies (*The Rooming house Madrigals*) ice for the eagles (*The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*) I know you (*Bone Palace Ballet*) I liked him (*play the piano drunk…*) I made a mistake (*Love Is a Dog from Hell*) I'm in love (*play the piano drunk…*) if we take—(*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) in a neighborhood of murder (*Love Is a Dog from Hell*) in other words (*Bone Palace Ballet*) in the center of the action (*Bone Palace Ballet*) in the lobby (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) it is not much (*The People Look Like Flowers at Last*) it's strange (*Dangling in the Tournefortia*) I was glad (*Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame*) Japanese Wife, The (*The Rooming house Madrigals*) junk (*play the piano drunk…*) killer, a (*Love Is a Dog from Hell*) killer gets ready, a (*play the piano drunk…*) ladies of summer, the (*play the piano drunk…*) lady in red, the (*Dangling in the Tournefortia*) last days of the suicide kid, the (*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) last generation, the (*War All the Time*) liberated woman and liberated man (*Open All Night*) life of the king (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) like a cherry seed in the throat (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) like a dolphin (*sifting through the madness…*) like a flower in the rain (*Love Is a Dog from Hell*) lisp, the (*Dangling in the Tournefortia*) literary discussion, a (*The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*) little girls hissed, the (*Come On In!*) loner, the (*play the piano*

drunk…) Look:, The (*The Rooming house Madrigals*) lost in San Pedro (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) Love Poem, A (*War All the Time*) Mademoi selle from Armentières (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) magical mystery tour (*uncollected*) man mowing the lawn across the way from me (*The People Look Like Flowers at Last*) Manx (*Open All Night*) marina: (*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) meanwhile (*The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*) melancholia (*Love Is a Dog from Hell*) metamorphosis (*play the piano drunk…*) millionaires (*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) mind and heart (*Come On In!*) mockingbird, the (*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) Mongolian coasts shining in light (*The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*) my atomic stockpile (*uncollected*) my big night on the town (*sifting through the madness…*) my cats (*Come On In!*) my failure (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) my fate (*uncollected*) my friend William (*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) my last winter (*The Flash of Lightning Behind the Mountain*) my life as a sitcom (*sifting through the madness…*) my special craving (*uncollected*) mystery leg (*The Flash of Lightning Behind the Mountain*) my telephone (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) night I saw George Raft in Vegas, the (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) 1930s, the (*The People Look Like Flowers at Last*) no leaders, please (*Come On In!*) no wonder (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) notes upon the flaxen aspect: (*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) notice (*The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*) now (*Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame*) now she’s free (*Open All Night*) nurses, the (*Septuagenarian Stew*) oh, yes (*War All the Time*) on being 20 (*War All the Time*) one for Sherwood Anderson (*Dangling in the Tournefortia*) one for the old boy (*War All the Time*) one for the shoeshine man (*Love Is a Dog from Hell*) one more good one (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) one writer’s funeral (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) on going out to get the mail (*Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame*) on the sidewalk and in the sun (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) orderly, the (*Septuagearian Stew*) peace (*The Last Night of

the Earth Poems) Phillipe's 1950 (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) pile-up, the (*Betting on the Muse*) pleasures of the damned, the (*Betting on the Muse*) poem for personnel managers: (*The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*) poem is a city, a (*The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*) poetry reading, the (*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) poetry (*The Last Night of the Earth Poems*) poop (*The Flash of Lightning Behind the Mountain*) prayer in bad weather (*Love Is a Dog from Hell*) price, the (*Love Is a Dog from Hell*) proud thin dying, the (*play the piano drunk…*) putrefaction (*You Get So Alone at Times That It Just Makes Sense*) racetrack parking lot at the end of the day (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) radio with guts, a (*play the piano drunk…*) railroad yard, the (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) relentless as the tarantula (*You Get So Alone at Times That It Just Makes Sense*) replacements, the (*The Last Night of the Earth Poems*) riots (*sifting through the madness…*) safe (*Bone Palace Ballet*) Scarlet (*Love Is a Dog from Hell*) scene from 1940: (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) scene in a tent outside the cotton fields of Bakersfield: (*The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*) school days (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) schoolyards of forever (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) screw-game, the (*The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*) 2nd novel, the (*Love Is a Dog from Hell*) secret laughter (*Open All Night*) self-inflicted wounds (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) sex (*Love Is a Dog from Hell*) she comes from somewhere (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) shit shits, the (*uncollected*) shoelace, the (*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) shoes (*You Get So Alone at Times That It Just Makes Sense*) shot of red-eye (*Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame*) shower, the (*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) silly damned thing anyhow (*The Flash of Lightning Behind the Mountain*) simple truth, the (*sifting through the madness…*) sit and endure (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) small talk (*Slouching Toward Nirvana*) smile to remember, a (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) smoking car, the (*Mockingbird Wish Me

Luck) snow of Italy, the (*The People Look Like Flowers at Last*) society should realize…(*Bone Palace Ballet*) somebody (*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) something about a woman (*uncollected*) something for the touts, the nuns, the grocery clerks and you…(*Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame*) something's knocking at the door (*Slouching Toward Nirvana*) song (*You Get So Alone at Times That It Just Makes Sense*) so now? (*Betting on the Muse*) souls of dead animals, the (*play the piano drunk…*) spring swan (*The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*) starve, go mad, or kill yourself (*uncollected*) strangest sight you ever did see—, the (*Love Is a Dog from Hell*) summation, a (*The Flash of Lightning Behind the Mountain*) sun coming down (*The People Look Like Flowers at Last*) Sunday lunch at the Holy Mission (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) tabby cat (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) talkers, the (*Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame*) talking to my mailbox (*War All the Time*) TB (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) there (*Bone Palace Ballet*) they, all of them, know (*Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame*) those marvelous lunches (*Betting on the Muse*) thoughts from a stone bench in Venice (*uncollected*) threat to my immortality, a (*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) 3:16 and one half…(*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) time to remember, a (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) tired in the afterdusk (*Septuagenarian Stew*) to lean back into it (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) to night (*Love Is a Dog from Hell*) tragedy of the leaves, the (*Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame*) trash men, the (*Burning in Water, Drowning in Flame*) trashcan lives (*You Get So Alone at Times That It Just Makes Sense*) Trollius and trellises (*The Last Night of the Earth Poems*) turnabout (*Love Is a Dog from Hell*) twilight musings (*Come On In!*) 2 Outside, As Bones Break in My Kitchen (*The Rooming house Madrigals*) upon reading an interview with a best-selling novelist in our metropolitan daily newspaper (*sifting through the madness…*) vacancy (*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) Van Gogh (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) Verdi (*uncollected*) veryest, the

(*uncollected*) was Li Po wrong? (*Come On In!*) we ain't got no money, honey, but we got rain (*The Last Night of the Earth Poems*) what a man I was (*The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*) what? (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) when Hugo Wolf went mad—(*The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*) when you wait for the dawn to crawl through the screen like a burglar to take your life away (*The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills*) where was Jane? (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) white dog (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*) who in the hell is Tom Jones? (*Love Is a Dog from Hell*) who needs it? (*sifting through the madness…*) wine of forever, the (*You Get So Alone at Times That It Just Makes Sense*) woman on the street (*Betting on the Muse*) world's greatest loser, the (*Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*) wrong way, the (*The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps*) young lady who lives in Canoga Park, the (*uncollected*) young man on the bus stop bench, the (*What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire*)

About the Author

CHARLES BUKOWSKI is one of America's best-known contemporary writers of poetry and prose, and, many would claim, its most influential and imitated poet. He was born in Andernach, Germany, to an American soldier father and a German mother in 1920, and brought to the United States at the age of three. He was raised in Los Angeles and lived there for fifty years. He published his first story in 1944, when he was twenty-four, and began writing poetry at the age of thirty-five. He died in San Pedro, California, on March 9, 1994, at the age of seventy-three, shortly after completing his last novel, *Pulp* (1994).

During his lifetime he published more than forty-five books of poetry and prose, including the novels *Post Office* (1971), *Ham on Rye* (1982), and *Hollywood* (1989). Among his most recent books are the posthumous editions of *What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire: New Poems* (1999), *Open All Night: New Poems* (2000), *Beerspit Night and Cursing: The Correspondence of Charles Bukowski and Sheri Martinelli, 1960–1967* (2001), *Night Torn Mad with Footsteps: New Poems* (2001), *sifting through the madness for the word, the line, the way: new poems* (2003), *The Flash of Lightning Behind the Mountain* (2004), *Slouching Toward Nirvana* (2005), *Come On In!* (2006), and *The People Look Like Flowers at Last* (2007).

All of his books have now been published in translation in more than a dozen languages and his worldwide popularity remains undiminished. In the years to come Ecco will publish additional volumes of previously uncollected poetry and letters.

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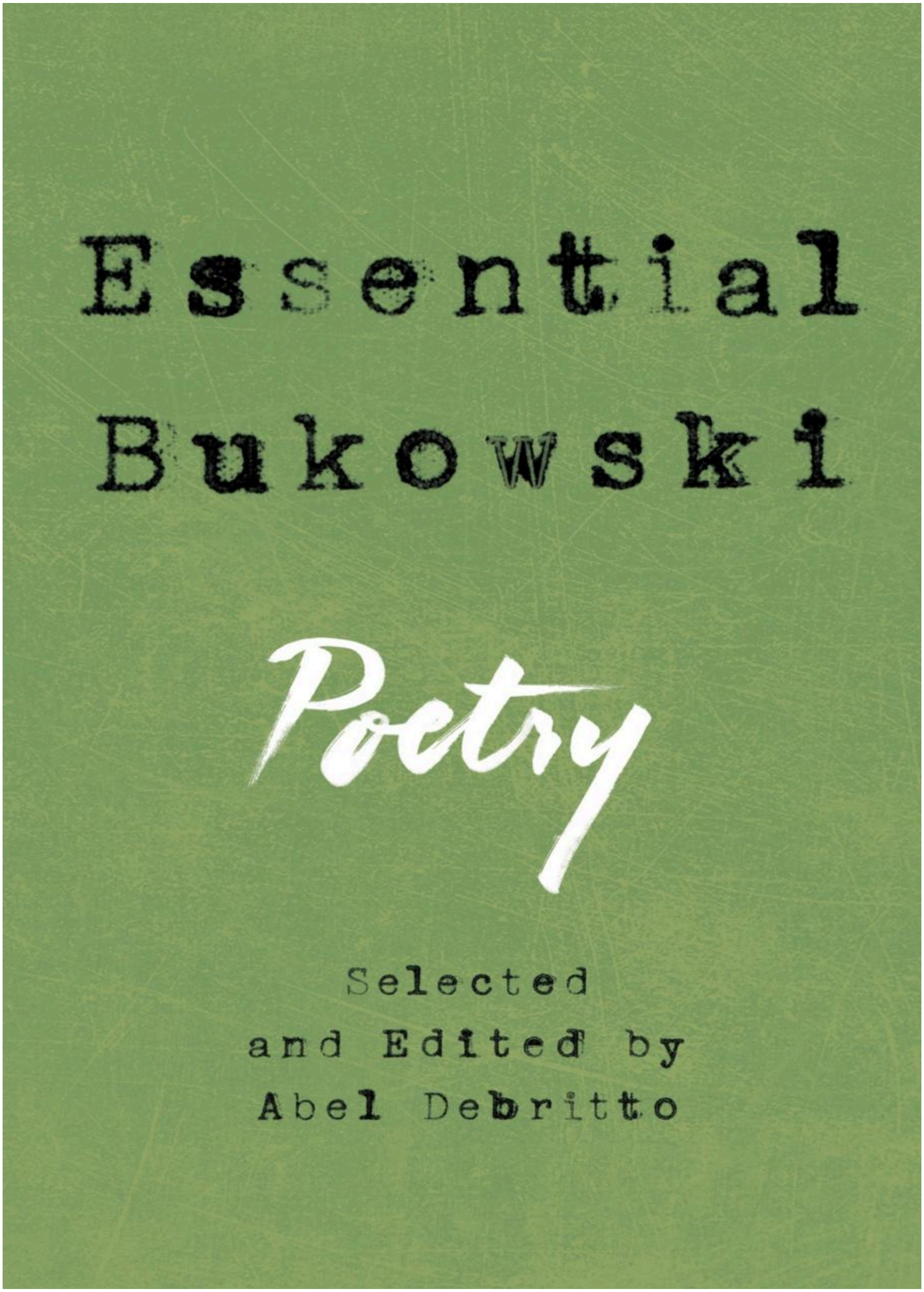

Essential Bukowski

Poetry

Selected
and Edited by
Abel Debritto

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poetry

Charles Bukowski

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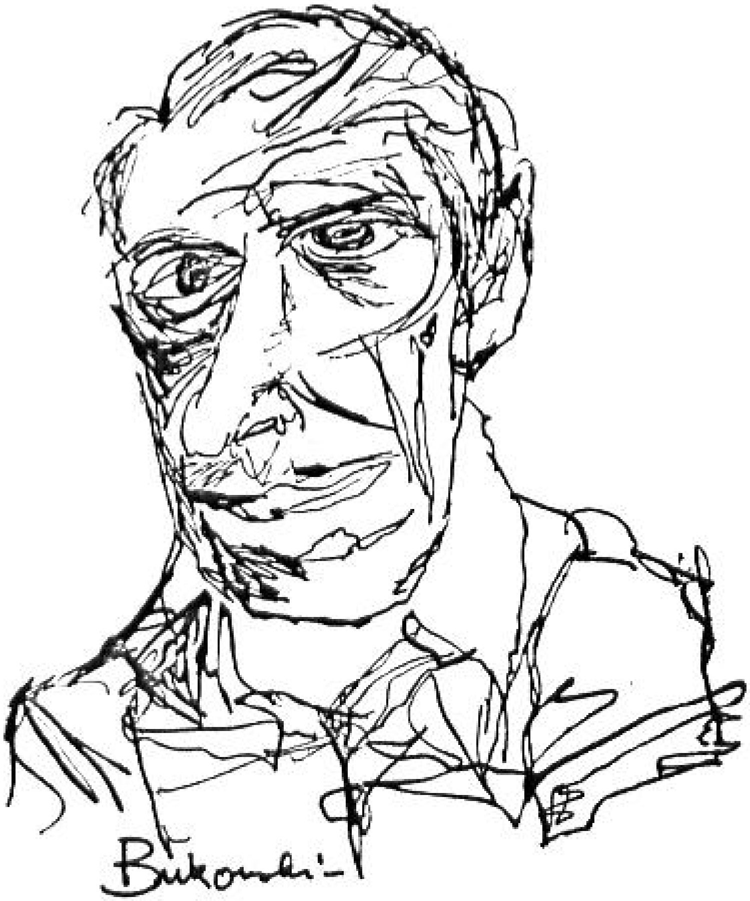
Bukowski

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INTRODUCTION

With more than twenty Charles Bukowski poetry books now available in print and dozens of first-rate unpublished poems on file, an *essential* collection has been long overdue. The task at hand was titanic: A prolific author by any measure, with some five thousand poems on record written over a span of fifty years, Bukowski famously wrote almost every night in an alcoholic stupor, trashing most of the gibberish the morning after. Picking Bukowski's best poems out of this massive heap was daunting, to say the least.

"The bluebird," "the genius of the crowd," "roll the dice," "the crunch," and other popular poems were strong contenders even before I put together a tentative list. As I pored over both the published and the unpublished work, some relatively obscure gems, such as "when Hugo Wolf went mad," "sparks," "the loser," and "another academy" came back to life for me. I also included poems that were pivotal in Bukowski's career, like "swastika star buttoned to my ass," which moved longtime German translator, agent, and friend Carl Weissner to become a fervent Bukowski enthusiast after reading it in a small press magazine in England in 1966. There were one hundred and seventy poems in my final selection for the book, which then had to be cut down to only ninety-five—"democracy," "they, all of them, know," "the word," and other top-notch poems had to be discarded.

These ninety-five essential poems barely represent two percent of Bukowski's mammoth output, but his poetic evolution is hard to miss in this chronological collection. The early poems, with their lyricism and occasional surreal imagery, give way in the 1970s to Bukowski's "Dirty Old Man" macho persona, when he finally achieves success in his fifties, after which he takes, in his final years, a more philosophical stance on life. Through it all, what remains the same is Bukowski's brilliance at capturing things as they are, his crystal-clear snapshots of his immediate experiences as well as the world at large, which he hardly ever photoshopped after the fact.

It is precisely this genuineness, along with the timeless quality of Bukowski’s most accomplished poems, that makes us embrace his poetry with open arms: the day-to-day but crucial trivialities found in “the shoelace”; the sensuality of “the shower”; the forces of life at work in “the mockingbird”; the tenderness of “love poem to Marina” and “the history of a tough motherfucker”; the elusive nature of art in many of the poems; the self-deprecating humor in “we’ve got to communicate”; the imperfection that makes us almost perfect in “one for the shoeshine man”; and the heartfelt portraits of the artists that Bukowski looks up to.

There’s also the striking, disarming simplicity of “art” and “nirvana”; the Hemingwayesque spare lines of “Carson McCullers” and “hell is a lonely place”; the hymns to individualism and willpower of “no leaders” and “the genius of the crowd”; the never-take-things-for-granted spirit of “I met a genius”; the long narrative poems that read as well-paced short-stories; and the life-affirming drive of “the laughing heart” and “the crunch.” These last two poems show that, despite the darkness that often entered his life and poetry, Bukowski always saw the light at the end of the tunnel, and we can’t help but identify with that feeling.

These poems are Bukowski at his most captivating: unvarnished, witty, and passionate, showing us all “the way” as he listens to classical music on “a radio with guts” and drinks “the blood of the gods” in his small Los Angeles apartments and studios. The Buddha of San Pedro, Bukowski ultimately smiles because he knows the secret of it all is way beyond him, and that’s the beauty of it: Bukowski distills life to its very essence, squeezing the magic out of the ordinary with his unmistakable, surpassing simplicity.

Essential, indeed.

friendly advice to a lot of young men, and a lot of old men, too

Go to Tibet.
Ride a camel.
Read the Bible.
Paint your shoes blue.
Grow a beard.
Circle the world in a paper canoe.
Subscribe to the *Saturday Evening Post*.
Chew on the left side of your mouth only.
Marry a woman with one leg and shave with a straight razor.
And carve your name in her anus.
Brush your teeth with gasoline.
Sleep all day and climb trees at night.
Be a monk and drink buckshot and beer.
Hold your head under water and play the violin.
Do a belly dance before pink candles.
Kill your dog.
Run for mayor.
Live in a barrel.
Break your head with a hatchet.
Plant tulips in the rain.
But don’t write any more poetry.

as the sparrow

To give life you must take life,
and as our grief falls flat and hollow
upon the billion-blooded sea
I pass upon serious inward-breaking shoals rimmed
with white-legged, white-bellied rotting creatures
lengthily dead and rioting against surrounding scenes.
Dear child, I only did to you what the sparrow
did to you; I am old when it is fashionable to be
young; I cry when it is fashionable to laugh.
I hated you when it would have taken less courage
to love.

layover

Making love in the sun, in the morning sun
in a hotel room
above the alley
where poor men poke for bottles;
making love in the sun
making love by a carpet redder than our blood,
making love while the boys sell headlines
and Cadillacs,
making love by a photograph of Paris
and an open pack of Chesterfields,
making love while other men—poor
fools—
work.
That moment—to this . . .
may be years in the way they measure,
but it's only one sentence back in my mind—
there are so many days
when living stops and pulls up and sits
and waits like a train on the rails.
I pass the hotel at 8
and at 5; there are cats in the alleys
and bottles and bums,
and I look up at the window and think,
I no longer know where you are,
and I walk on and wonder where
the living goes
when it stops.

the life of Borodin

the next time you listen to Borodin
remember he was just a chemist
who wrote music to relax;
his house was jammed with people:
students, artists, drunkards, bums,
and he never knew how to say “no.”
the next time you listen to Borodin
remember his wife used his compositions
to line the cat boxes with
or to cover jars of sour milk;
she had asthma and insomnia
and fed him soft-boiled eggs
and when he wanted to cover his head
to hide out the sounds of the house
she only allowed him to use the sheet;
besides there was usually somebody
in his bed
(they slept separately when they slept
at all)
and since all the chairs
were usually taken
he often slept on the stairway
wrapped in an old shawl;
she told him when to cut his nails,
not to sing or whistle
or put too much lemon in his tea
or press it with a spoon;
Symphony #2 in B Minor
Prince Igor
In the Steppes of Central Asia

he could sleep only by putting a piece
of dark cloth over his eyes;
in 1887 he attended a dance
at the Medical Academy
dressed in a merrymaking national costume;
at last, he seemed exceptionally gay
and when he fell to the floor,
they thought he was clowning.
  the next time you listen to Borodin,
remember . . .

when Hugo Wolf went mad

Hugo Wolf went mad while eating an onion
and writing his 253rd song; it was rainy
April and the worms came out of the ground
humming Tannhãuser, and he spilled his milk
with his ink, and his blood fell out to the walls
and he howled and he roared and he screamed, and
down-
stairs his landlady said, I *knew* it, that rotten son
of a
bitch has dummied up his brain, he's jacked-off
his last piece
of music and now I'll never get the rent, and someday
he'll be famous
and they'll bury him in the rain, but right now
I wish he'd shut
up that god damned screaming—for my money he's
a silly pansy jackass
and when they move him out of here, I hope they
move in a good solid fisherman
or a hangman
or a seller of
biblical tracts.

destroying beauty

a rose
red sunlight;
I take it apart
in the garage
like a puzzle:
the petals are as greasy
as old bacon
and fall
like the maidens of the world
backs to floor
and I look up
at the old calendar
hung from a nail
and touch
my wrinkled face
and smile
because
the secret
is beyond me.

the day I kicked a bankroll out the window

and, I said, you can take your rich aunts and uncles
and grandfathers and fathers
and all their lousy oil
and their seven lakes
and their wild turkey
and buffalo
and the whole state of Texas,
meaning, your crow-blasts
and your Saturday night boardwalks,
and your 2-bit
library
and your crooked councilmen
and your pansy artists—
you can take all these
and your weekly newspaper
and your famous tornadoes
and your filthy floods
and all your yowling cats
and your subscription to *Life*,
and shove them, baby,
shove them.
I can handle a pick and ax again (I think)
and I can pick up
25 bucks for a 4-rounder (maybe);
sure, I'm 38
but a little dye can pinch the gray
out of my hair;
and I can still write a poem (sometimes),
don't forget *that*, and even if
they don't pay off,

it’s better than waiting for death and oil,
and shooting wild turkey,
and waiting for the world
to begin.
  all right, bum, she said,
get out.
  what? I said.
  get out. you’ve thrown your
last tantrum.
I’m tired of your damned tantrums:
you’re always acting like a
character in an O’Neill play.
  but I’m different, baby,
I can’t help
it.
  you’re different, all right!
God, how different!
don’t slam
the door
when you leave.
  but, baby, I *love* your
money!
  you never once said
you loved me!
  what do you want
a liar or a
lover?
  you’re neither! out, bum,
out!
  . . . but baby!
  go back to O’Neill!
  I went to the door,
softly closed it and walked away,
thinking: all they want
is a wooden Indian
to say yes and no

and stand over the fire and
not raise too much hell;
but you’re getting to be
an old man, kiddo:
next time play it closer
to the
vest.

the twins

he hinted at times that I was a bastard and I told him to listen
to Brahms, and I told him to learn to paint and drink and not be
dominated by women and dollars
but he screamed at me, For Christ's sake remember your mother,
remember your country,
you'll kill us all! . . .
I move through my father's house (on which he owed $8,000 after 20
years on the same job) and look at his dead shoes
the way his feet curled the leather, as if he was angrily planting roses,
and he was, and I look at his dead cigarette, his last cigarette
and the last bed he slept in that night, and I feel I should remake it
but I can't, for a father is always your master even when he's gone;
I guess these things have happened time and again but I can't help
thinking
            to die on a kitchen floor at 7 o'clock in the morning
            while other people are frying eggs
            is not so rough
            unless it happens to you.
I go outside and pick an orange and peel back the bright skin;
things are still living: the grass is growing quite well,
the sun sends down its rays circled by a Russian satellite,
a dog barks senselessly somewhere, the neighbors peek behind blinds.
I am a stranger here, and have been (I suppose) somewhat the rogue,
and I have no doubt he painted me quite well (the old boy and I
fought like mountain lions) and they say he left it all to some woman
in Duarte but I don't give a damn—she can have it: he was my old
man
            and he died.
inside, I try on a light blue suit
much better than anything I have ever worn

and I flap the arms like a scarecrow in the wind
but it’s no good:
I can’t keep him alive
no matter how much we hated each other.
  we looked exactly alike, we could have been twins
the old man and I: that’s what they
said. he had his bulbs on the screen
ready for planting
while I was lying with a whore from 3rd Street.
  very well. grant us this moment: standing before a mirror
in my dead father’s suit
waiting also
to die.

to the whore who took my poems

some say we should keep personal remorse from the
poem,
stay abstract, and there is some reason in this,
but jezus:
12 poems gone and I don’t keep carbons and you have
my
paintings too, my best ones; it’s stifling:
are you trying to crush me out like the rest of them?
why didn’t you take my money? they usually do
from the sleeping drunken pants sick in the corner.
next time take my left arm or a fifty
but not my poems:
I’m not Shakespeare
but sometimes simply
there won’t be any more, abstract or otherwise;
there’ll always be money and whores and drunkards
down to the last bomb,
but as God said,
crossing his legs,
I see where I have made plenty of poets
but not so very much
poetry.

the loser

and the next I remembered I'm on a table,
everybody's gone: the head of bravery
under light, scowling, flailing me down . . .
and then some toad stood there, smoking a cigar:
“Kid, you're no fighter,” he told me,
and I got up and knocked him over a chair;
it was like a scene in a movie, and
he stayed there on his big rump and said
over and over: “Jesus, Jesus, whatsamatta wit
you?” and I got up and dressed,
the tape still on my hands, and when I got home
I tore the tape off my hands and
wrote my first poem,
and I've been fighting
ever since.

the best way to get famous is to run away

I found a loose cement slab outside the ice-cream store,
tossed it aside and began to dig; the earth was
soft and full of worms and soon I was in to my
waist, size 36;
a crowd gathered but stepped back before my shots
of mud,
and by the time the police came, I was in below
my head,
frightening gophers, eels and finding bits of golden
inlaid skull,
and they asked me, are you looking for oil, treasure,
gold, the end of China? are you looking for love, God,
a lost key chain? and little girls dripping ice-cream
peered into my darkness, and a psychiatrist came
and a
college professor and a movie actress in a bikini, and
a Russian spy and a French spy and an English spy,
and a drama critic and a bill collector and an old
girlfriend, and they all asked me, what are you
looking
for? and soon it began to rain . . . atomic submarines
changed course, Tuesday Weld hid behind a newspaper,
Jean-Paul Sartre rolled in his sleep, and my hole
filled
with water; I came out black as Africa, shooting
stars
and epitaphs, my pockets full of lovely worms,
and they took me to their jail and gave me a shower
and a nice cell, rent-free, and even now the people
are picketing in my cause, and I have signed

contracts to appear on the stage and television,
to write a guest column for the local paper and
write a book and endorse some products, I have
enough money to last me several years at the best
hotels, but as soon as I get out of here, I’m gonna
find me another loose slab and begin to dig, dig,
dig, and this time I’m not coming back . . . rain, shine,
or bikini, and the reporters keep asking, why did you
do it? but I just light my cigarette and smile . . .

the tragedy of the leaves

I awakened to dryness and the ferns were dead,
the potted plants yellow as corn;
my woman was gone
and the empty bottles like bled corpses
surrounded me with their uselessness;
the sun was still good, though,
and my landlady’s note cracked in fine and
undemanding yellowness; what was needed now
was a good comedian, ancient style, a jester
with jokes upon absurd pain; pain is absurd
because it exists, nothing more;
I shaved carefully with an old razor
the man who had once been young and
said to have genius; but
that’s the tragedy of the leaves,
the dead ferns, the dead plants;
and I walked into a dark hall
where the landlady stood
execrating and final,
sending me to hell,
waving her fat, sweaty arms
and screaming
screaming for rent
because the world had failed us
both.

Charles Bukowski

OLD MAN, DEAD IN A ROOM

this thing upon me is not death
but it's as real,
AND as LANDLORDS full of MAGGOTS
pound FOR rent
I eat walnuts in the sweet
of my privacy
and LISTEN FOR more important
drummers;
IT'S AS REAL, IT'S AS REAL
as the broken-boned SPARROW
cat-mouthed to utter
more than mere
and miserable argument;
between my toes I STARE
at clouds, at seas of gaunt
sepulcher...
and scratch MY ~~my~~ BACK
and form a novel
as all MY ~~my~~ LOVELY WOMEN
(WIVES AND LOVERS)
BREAK LIKE ENGINES
into some steam of sorrow
to be blown into ECLIPSE;
~~bone is bone~~
BONE IS BONE
but this thing UPON ME
LIKE A FLOWER/AND A FEAST,
BELIEVE me
is not death and is not
glory
and LIKE QUIXOTE'S WINDMILLS
makes a foe
turned by the HEAVENS
against one MAN;
... THIS THING upon ME,
great GOD,
THIS THING UPON ME
CRAWLING LIKE A SNAKE,
terrifying my love of
COMMONNESS,
some call ART
some call POETRY;
it's not DEATH
but ~~dying~~ DYING
WILL SOLVE it's POWER
and as my gray hands
drop a LAST
DESPERATE PEN
in some cheap ROOM ~~Room~~
they will find me there
AND NEVER KNOW
my name
MY MEANING
nor the treasure
of MY ~~my~~ ESCAPE.

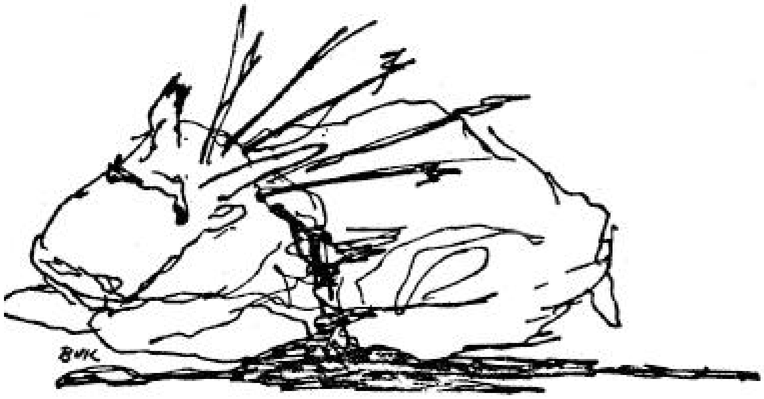
old man, dead in a room

this thing upon me is not death
but it’s as real,
and as landlords full of maggots
pound for rent
I eat walnuts in the sheath
of my privacy
and listen for more important
drummers;
it’s as real, it’s as real
as the broken-boned sparrow
cat-mouthed to utter
more than mere
and miserable argument;
between my toes I stare
at clouds, at seas of gaunt
sepulcher . . .
and scratch my back
and form a vowel
as all my lovely women
(wives and lovers)
break like engines
into some steam of sorrow
to be blown into eclipse;
bone is bone
but this thing upon me
as I tear the window shades
and walk caged rugs,
this thing upon me
like a flower and a feast,
believe me

is not death and is not
glory
and like Quixote’s windmills
makes a foe
turned by the heavens
against one man;
. . . this thing upon me,
great god,
this thing upon me
crawling like a snake,
terrifying my love of commonness,
some call Art
some call poetry;
it’s not death
but dying will solve its power
and as my gray hands
drop a last desperate pen
in some cheap room
they will find me there
and never know
my name
my meaning
nor the treasure
of my escape.

the priest and the matador

in the slow Mexican air I watched the bull die
and they cut off his ear, and his great head held
no more terror than a rock.
driving back the next day we stopped at the Mission
and watched the golden red and blue flowers pulling
like tigers in the wind.
set this to metric: the bull, and the fort of Christ:
the matador on his knees, the dead bull his baby;
and the priest staring from the window
like a caged bear.
you may argue in the marketplace and pull at your
doubts with silken strings: I will only tell you
this: I have lived in both their temples,
believing all and nothing—perhaps, now, they will
die in mine.



the state of world affairs from a 3rd floor window

I am watching a girl dressed in a
light green sweater, blue shorts, long black stockings;
there is a necklace of some sort
but her breasts are small, poor thing,
and she watches her nails
as her dirty white dog sniffs the grass
in erratic circles;
a pigeon is there too, circling,
half dead with a tick of a brain
and I am upstairs in my underwear,
3 day beard, pouring a beer and waiting
for something literary or symphonic to happen;
but they keep circling, circling, and a thin old man
in his last winter rolls by pushed by a girl
in a Catholic school dress;
somewhere there are the Alps, and ships
are now crossing the sea;
there are piles and piles of H-and A-bombs,
enough to blow up fifty worlds and Mars thrown in,
but they keep circling,
the girl shifts buttocks,
and the Hollywood Hills stand there, stand there
full of drunks and insane people and
much kissing in automobiles,
but it's no good: *che sarà, sarà:*
her dirty white dog simply will not shit,
and with a last look at her nails
she, with much whirling of buttocks
walks to her downstairs court
trailed by her constipated dog (simply not worried),

leaving me looking at a most unsymphonic pigeon.
well, from the looks of things, relax:
the bombs will
never
go off.

the swan

swans die in the spring too
and there it floated
dead on a Sunday
sideways
circling in current
and I walked to the rotunda
and overhead
gods in chariots
dogs, women
circled,
and death
ran down my throat
like a mouse,
and I heard the people coming
with their picnic bags
and laughter,
and I felt guilty
for the swan
as if death
were a thing of shame
and like a fool
I walked away
and left them
my beautiful swan.

beans with garlic

this is important enough:
to get your feelings down,
it is better than shaving
or cooking beans with garlic.
it is the little we can do
this small bravery of knowledge
and there is of course
madness and terror too
in knowing
that some part of you
wound up like a clock
can never be wound again
once it stops.
but now
there’s a ticking under your shirt
and you whirl the beans with a spoon,
one love dead, one love departed
another love . . .
ah! as many loves as beans
yes, count them now
sad, sad
your feelings boiling over flame,
get this down.

a poem is a city

a poem is a city filled with streets and sewers
filled with saints, heroes, beggars, madmen,
filled with banality and booze,
filled with rain and thunder and periods of
drought, a poem is a city at war,
a poem is a city asking a clock why,
a poem is a city burning,
a poem is a city under guns
its barbershops filled with cynical drunks,
a poem is a city where God rides naked
through the streets like Lady Godiva,
where dogs bark at night, and chase away
the flag; a poem is a city of poets,
most of them quite similar
and envious and bitter . . .
a poem is this city now,
50 miles from nowhere,
9:09 in the morning,
the taste of liquor and cigarettes,
no police, no lovers walking the streets,
this poem, this city, closing its doors,
barricaded, almost empty,
mournful without tears, aging without pity,
the hardrock mountains,
the ocean like a lavender flame,
a moon destitute of greatness,
a small music from broken windows . . .
a poem is a city, a poem is a nation,
a poem is the world . . .

and now I stick this under glass
for the gaunt mad editor’s scrutiny,
and night is elsewhere
and faint gray ladies stand in line,
dog follows dog to estuary,
the trumpets bring on gallows
as small men rant at things
they cannot do.

consummation of grief

I even hear the mountains
the way they laugh
up and down their blue sides
and down in the water
the fish cry
and all the water
is their tears.
I listen to the water
on nights I drink away
and the sadness becomes so great
I hear it in my clock
it becomes knobs upon my dresser
it becomes paper on the floor
it becomes a shoehorn
a laundry ticket
it becomes
cigarette smoke
climbing a chapel of dark vines . . .
it matters little very little love is not so bad
or very little life what counts
is waiting on walls
I was born for this I was born to hustle roses down the avenues of the dead.

for Jane: with all the love I had, which was not enough

I pick up the skirt,
I pick up the sparkling beads
in black,
this thing that moved once
around flesh,
and I call God a liar,
I say anything that moved
like that
or knew
my name
could never die
in the common verity of dying,
and I pick
up her lovely
dress,
all her loveliness gone,
and I speak
to all the gods,
Jewish gods, Christ-gods,
chips of blinking things,
idols, pills, bread,
fathoms, risks,
knowledgeable surrender,
rats in the gravy of 2 gone quite mad
without a chance,
hummingbird knowledge, hummingbird chance,
I lean upon this,
I lean on all of this
and I know:
her dress upon my arm:

but
they will not
give her back to me.

for Jane

  225 days under grass
and you know more than I.
  they have long taken your blood,
you are a dry stick in a basket.
  is this how it works?
  in this room
the hours of love
still make shadows.
  when you left
you took almost
everything.
  I kneel in the nights
before tigers
that will not let me be.
  what you were
will not happen again.
  the tigers have found me
and I do not care.

john dillinger and *le chasseur maudit*

  it’s unfortunate, and simply not the style, but I don’t care:
girls remind me of hair in the sink, girls remind me of intestines
and bladders and excretory movements; it’s unfortunate also that
ice-cream bells, babies, engine-valves, plagiostomes, palm trees,
footsteps in the hall . . . all excite me with the cold calmness
of the gravestone; nowhere, perhaps, is there sanctuary except
in hearing that there were other desperate men:
Dillinger, Rimbaud, Villon, Babyface Nelson, Seneca, Van Gogh,
or desperate women: lady wrestlers, nurses, waitresses, whores
poetesses . . . although,
I do suppose the breaking out of ice-cubes is important
or a mouse nosing an empty beercan—
two hollow emptinesses looking into each other,
or the nightsea stuck with soiled ships
that enter the chary web of your brain with their lights,
with their salty lights
that touch you and leave you
for the more solid love of some India;
or driving great distances without reason
sleep-drugged through open windows that
tear and flap your shirt like a frightened bird,
and always the stoplights, always red,
nightfire and defeat, defeat . . .
scorpions, scraps, fardels:
x-jobs, x-wives, x-faces, x-lives,
Beethoven in his grave as dead as a beet;
red wheel-barrows, yes, perhaps,
or a letter from Hell signed by the devil
or two good boys beating the guts out of each other
in some cheap stadium full of screaming smoke,

but mostly, I don't care, sitting here
with a mouthful of rotten teeth,
sitting here reading Herrick and Spenser and
Marvell and Hopkins and Bronte (Emily, today);
and listening to the Dvorak *Midday Witch*
or Franck's *Le Chasseur Maudit,*
actually I don't care, and it's unfortunate:
I have been getting letters from a young poet
(very young, it seems) telling me that some day
I will most surely be recognized as
one of the world's great poets. *Poet!*
a malversation: today I walked in the sun and streets
of this city: seeing nothing, learning nothing, being
nothing, and coming back to my room
I passed an old woman who smiled a horrible smile;
she was already dead, and everywhere I remembered wires:
telephone wires, electric wires, wires for electric faces
trapped like goldfish in the glass and smiling,
and the birds were gone, none of the birds wanted wire
or the smiling of wire
and I closed my door (at last)
but through the windows it was the same:
a horn honked, somebody laughed, a toilet flushed,
and oddly then
I thought of all the horses with numbers
that have gone by in the screaming,
gone by like Socrates, gone by like Lorca,
like Chatterton . . .
I'd rather imagine our death will not matter too much
except as a matter of disposal, a problem,
like dumping the garbage,
and although I have saved the young poet's letters,
I do not believe them
but like at the
diseased palm trees

and the end of the sun,
I sometimes look.

crucifix in a deathhand

yes, they begin out in a willow, I think
the starch mountains begin out in the willow
and keep right on going without regard for
pumas or nectarines
somehow these mountains are like
an old woman with a bad memory and
a shopping basket.
we are in a basin, that is the
idea. down in the sand and the alleys,
this land punched-in, cuffed-out, divided,
held like a crucifix in a deathhand,
this land bought, resold, bought again and
sold again, the wars long over,
the Spaniards all the way back in Spain
down in the thimble again, and now
real estaters, subdividers, landlords, freeway
engineers arguing. this is their land and
I walk on it, live on it a little while
near Hollywood here I see young men in rooms
listening to glazed recordings
and I think too of old men sick of music
sick of everything, and death like suicide
I think is sometimes voluntary, and to get your
hold on the land here it is best to return to the
Grand Central Market, see the old Mexican women,
the poor . . . I am sure you have seen these same women
many years before
arguing
with the same young Japanese clerks
witty, knowledgeable and golden

among their soaring store of oranges, apples
avocados, tomatoes, cucumbers—
and you know how *these* look, they do look good
as if you could eat them all
light a cigar and smoke away the bad world.
then it’s best to go back to the bars, the same bars—
wooden, stale, merciless, green
with the young policeman walking through
scared and looking for trouble,
and the beer is still bad
it has an edge that already mixes with vomit and
decay, and you’ve got to be strong in the shadows
to ignore it, to ignore the poor and to ignore yourself
and the shopping bag between your legs
down there feeling good with its avocados and
oranges and fresh fish and wine bottles, who needs
a Fort Lauderdale winter?
25 years ago there used to be a whore there
with a film over one eye, who was too fat
and made little silver bells out of cigarette
tinfoil. the sun seemed warmer then
although this was probably not
true, and you take your shopping bag
outside and walk along the street
and the green beer hangs there
just above your stomach like
a short and shameful shawl, and
you look around and no longer
see any
old men.

CRUCIFIX IN A DEATHHAND

YES, THEY BEGIN OUT IN THE WILLOWS I THINK
THE STARCH MOUNTAINS BEGIN OUT IN THE WILLOW
AND KEEP RIGHT ON GOING WITHOUT REGARD FOR
PLUMS OR NECTARINES
SOMEHOW THESE MOUNTAINS ARE LIKE AN OLD WOMAN
WITH A BAD MEMORY AND A SHOPPING
BASKET. WE ARE IN THE BASIN. THAT IS THE
IDEA. DOWN IN THE SAND AND THE ALLEYS,
THIS LAND PUNCHED-IN, CUFFED-OUT, DIVIDED,
HELD LIKE A CRUCIFIX IN A DEATHHAND,
THIS LAND BOUGHT, RESOLD, BOUGHT AGAIN AND
SOLD AGAIN, THE WARS LONG OVER,
THE SPANIARDS ALL THE WAY BACK IN SPAIN
DOWN IN THE THIMBLE AGAIN, AND NOW
REAL ESTATERS, SUBDIVIDERS, LANDLORDS, FREEWAY
ENGINEERS ARGUING. THIS IS THEIR LAND AND
I WALK ON IT, LIVE ON IT A LITTLE WHILE
NEAR HOLLYWOOD HERE WHERE I SEE YOUNG MEN IN ROOMS
LISTENING TO GLAZED RECORDINGS
AND I THINK TOO OF OLD MEN SICK OF MUSIC
SICK OF EVERYTHING, AND DEATH LIKE SUICIDE
I THINK IS SOMETIMES VOLUNTARY, AND TO GET YOUR
HOLD ON THE LAND HERE IT IS BEST TO RETURN TO THE
GRAND CENTRAL MARKET, SEE THE OLD MEXICAN WOMEN
THE POOR... I AM SURE YOU HAVE SEEN THESE SAME WOMEN
MANY YEARS BEFORE
ARGUING
WITH THE SAME YOUNG JAPANESE CLERKS
WITTY, KNOWLEDGEABLE AND GOLDEN
AMONG THEIR SOARING STORE OF ORANGES, APPLES,
AVOCADOES, TOMATOES, CUCUMBERS—
AND YOU KNOW HOW THESE LOOK, THEY DO LOOK GOOD
AS IF YOU COULD EAT THEM ALL
LIGHT A CIGAR AND SMOKE AWAY THE BAD WORLD.
THEN IT'S BEST TO GO BACK TO THE BARS, THE SAME BARS—
WOODEN, STALE, MERCILESS, GREEN
WITH THE YOUNG POLICEMAN WALKING THROUGH
SCARED AND LOOKING FOR TROUBLE
AND THE BEER IS STILL BAD
IT HAS AN EDGE THAT ALREADY MIXES WITH VOMIT AND
DECAY, AND YOU'VE GOT TO BE STRONG IN THE SHADOWS
TO IGNORE IT, TO IGNORE THE POOR AND TO IGNORE YOURSELF
AND THE SHOPPING BAG BETWEEN YOUR LEGS
DOWN THERE FEELING GOOD WITH ITS AVOCADOES AND ORANGES AND
FRESH FISH AND WINE BOTTLE, WHO NEEDS A FORT LAUDERDALE WINTER?
25 YEARS AGO THERE USED TO BE A WHORE THERE WITH A
FILM OVER ONE EYE, WHO WAS TOO FAT AND MADE LITTLE SILVER BELLS
OUT OF CIGARETTE TINFOIL. THE SUN SEEMED WARMER THEN
ALTHOUGH THIS WAS PROBABLY NOT
TRUE, AND YOU
TAKE YOUR SHOPPING BAG OUTSIDE AND WALK ALONG THE STREET
AND THE GREEN BEER HANGS THERE JUST ABOVE YOUR STOMACH LIKE
A SHORT AND SHAMEFUL SHAWL. AND
YOU LOOK AROUND AND NO LONGER
SEE ANY
OLD MEN.

Charles Bukowski

something for the touts, the nuns, the grocery clerks and you . . .

we have everything and we have nothing
and some men do it in churches
and some men do it by tearing butterflies
in half
and some men do it in Palm Springs
laying it into butterblondes
with Cadillac souls
Cadillacs and butterflies
nothing and everything,
the face melting down to the last puff
in a cellar in Corpus Christi.
there’s something for the touts, the nuns,
the grocery clerks and you . . .
something at 8 a.m., something in the library
something in the river,
everything and nothing.
in the slaughterhouse it comes running along
the ceiling on a hook, and you swing it—
one
        two
              three
and then you’ve got it, $200 worth of dead
meat, its bones against your bones
something and nothing.
it’s always early enough to die and
it’s always too late,
and the drill of blood in the basin white
it tells you nothing at all
and the gravediggers playing poker over
5 a.m. coffee, waiting for the grass

to dismiss the frost . . .
they tell you nothing at all.
  we have everything and we have nothing—
days with glass edges and the impossible stink
of river moss—worse than shit;
checkerboard days of moves and countermoves,
fagged interest, with as much sense in defeat as
in victory; slow days like mules
humping it slagged and sullen and sun-glazed
up a road where a madman sits waiting among
bluejays and wrens netted in and sucked a flakey
gray.
good days too of wine and shouting, fights
in alleys, fat legs of women striving around
your bowels buried in moans,
the signs in bullrings like diamonds hollering
Mother Capri, violets coming out of the ground
telling you to forget the dead armies and the loves
that robbed you.
days when children say funny and brilliant things
like savages trying to send you a message through
their bodies while their bodies are still
alive enough to transmit and feel and run up
and down without locks and paychecks and
ideals and possessions and beetle-like
opinions.
days when you can cry all day long in
a green room with the door locked, days
when you can laugh at the breadman
because his legs are too long, days
of looking at hedges . . .
  and nothing, and nothing. the days of
the bosses, yellow men
with bad breath and big feet, men
who look like frogs, hyenas, men who walk
as if melody had never been invented, men

who think it is intelligent to hire and fire and
profit, men with expensive wives they possess
like 60 acres of ground to be drilled
or shown-off or to be walled away from
the incompetent, men who'd kill you
because they're crazy and justify it because
it's the law, men who stand in front of
windows 30 feet wide and see nothing,
men with luxury yachts who can sail around
the world and yet never get out of their vest
pockets, men like snails, men like eels, men
like slugs, and not as good . . .
  and nothing. getting your last paycheck
at a harbor, at a factory, at a hospital, at an
aircraft plant, at a penny arcade, at a
barbershop, at a job you didn't want
anyway.
income tax, sickness, servility, broken
arms, broken heads—all the stuffing
comes out like an old pillow.
  we have everything and we have nothing.
some do it well enough for a while and
then give way. fame gets them or disgust
or age or lack of proper diet or ink
across the eyes or children in college
or new cars or broken backs while skiing
in Switzerland or new politics or new wives
or just natural change and decay—
the man you knew yesterday hooking
for ten rounds or drinking for three days and
three nights by the Sawtooth mountains now
just something under a sheet or a cross
or a stone or under an easy delusion,
or packing a Bible or a golf bag or a
briefcase: how they go, how they go!—all
the ones you thought would never go.

days like this. like your day today.
maybe the rain on the window trying to
get through to you. what do you see today?
what is it? where are you? the best
days are sometimes the first, sometimes
the middle and even sometimes the last.
the vacant lots are not bad. churches in
Europe on postcards are not bad. people in
wax museums frozen into their best sterility
are not bad, horrible but not bad. the
cannon, think of the cannon. and toast for
breakfast the coffee hot enough you
know your tongue is still there. three
geraniums outside a window, trying to be
red and trying to be pink and trying to be
geraniums. no wonder sometimes the women
cry, no wonder the mules don't want
to go up the hill. are you in a hotel room
in Detroit looking for a cigarette? one more
good day. a little bit of it. and as
the nurses come out of the building after
their shift, having had enough, eight nurses
with different names and different places
to go—walking across the lawn, some of them
want cocoa and a paper, some of them want a
hot bath, some of them want a man, some
of them are hardly thinking at all. enough
and not enough. arcs and pilgrims, oranges
gutters, ferns, antibodies, boxes of
tissue paper.
in the most decent sometimes sun
there is the softsmoke feeling from urns
and the canned sound of old battleplanes
and if you go inside and run your finger
along the window ledge you'll find
dirt, maybe even earth.

and if you look out the window
there will be the day, and as you
get older you’ll keep looking
keep looking
sucking your tongue in a little
ah ah no no maybe
  some do it naturally
some obscenely
everywhere.

no. 6

I'll settle for the 6 horse
on a rainy afternoon
a paper cup of coffee
in my hand
a little way to go,
the wind twirling out
small wrens from
the upper grandstand roof,
the jocks coming out
for a middle race
silent
and the easy rain making
everything
at once
almost alike,
the horses at peace with
each other
before the drunken war
and I am under the grandstand
feeling for
cigarettes
settling for coffee,
then the horses walk by
taking their little men
away—
it is funereal and graceful
and glad
like the opening
of flowers.

and the moon and the stars and the world:

long walks at
night—
that’s what’s good
for the
soul:
peeking into windows
watching tired
housewives
trying to fight
off
their beer-maddened
husbands.

true story

they found him walking along the freeway
all red in
front
he had taken a rusty tin can
and cut off his sexual
machinery
as if to say—
see what you’ve done to
me? you might as well have the
rest.
and he put part of him
in one pocket and
part of him in
another
and that’s how they found him,
walking
along.
they gave him over to the
doctors
who tried to sew the parts
back
on
but the parts were
quite contented
the way they
were.
I think sometimes of all the good
ass
turned over to the

monsters of the
world.
  maybe it was his protest against
this or
his protest
against
everything.
  a one man
Freedom March
that never squeezed in
between
the concert reviews and the
baseball
scores.
  God, or somebody,
bless
him.

the genius of the crowd

There is enough treachery, hatred,
violence, Absurdity in the average human
being To supply any given army on any given
day.
AND The Best At Murder Are Those
Who Preach Against It.
AND The Best At Hate Are Those
Who Preach LOVE
AND THE BEST AT WAR
—FINALLY—ARE THOSE WHO
PREACH
PEACE
Those Who Preach GOD
NEED God
Those Who Preach PEACE
Do Not Have Peace.
THOSE WHO PREACH LOVE
DO NOT HAVE LOVE
BEWARE THE PREACHERS
Beware The Knowers.
Beware Those Who Are ALWAYS
READING
BOOKS
Beware Those Who Either Detest
Poverty Or Are Proud Of It BEWARE Those Quick To Praise
For They Need PRAISE In Return
BEWARE Those Quick To Censure:
They Are Afraid Of What They Do
Not Know Beware Those Who Seek Constant

Crowds; They Are Nothing
Alone
Beware The Average Man The Average Woman BEWARE
Their Love Their Love Is Average, Seeks
Average
But There Is Genius In Their Hatred
There Is Enough Genius In Their
Hatred To Kill You, To Kill
Anybody.
Not Wanting Solitude
Not Understanding Solitude
They Will Attempt To Destroy
Anything
That Differs
From Their Own Not Being Able To Create Art They Will Not Understand
Art They Will Consider Their Failure
As Creators
Only As A Failure
Of The World Not Being Able To Love Fully
They Will BELIEVE Your Love
Incomplete
AND THEN THEY WILL HATE
YOU
And Their Hatred Will Be Perfect
Like A Shining Diamond
Like A Knife
Like A Mountain
LIKE A TIGER
LIKE Hemlock Their Finest ART

I met a genius

I met a genius on the train
today
about 6 years old,
he sat beside me
and as the train
ran down along the coast
we came to the ocean
and then he looked at me
and said,
“it’s not pretty.”
it was the first time I’d
realized
that.

swastika star buttoned to my ass

sitting around here burning spiders to death with my
cigar
I can hardly believe that all your pussies are as
sweet as mine used to
be.
I did it in fireplaces
on fire escapes
in cornfields
in mother’s bedroom (with mother) (sometimes)
between bomb explosions at Nantes and St. Etienne
over the sink of the men’s crapper
in a train passing through Utah.
I’ve done it sober
potted
crazy and sane.
I’ve done it when I wanted to and when I haven’t wanted
to.
I’ve done it with women twice my age and with women half my
age.
I’ve done it with animals, I’ve done it with dead meat:
beefsteak and melted butter and I’ve used my
hand.
now the only things that stand up around here
are the rods that hold up the
lampshades. I am going to rob a bank or beat hell out of a
blind man any day now and they’ll never know
why.

the blackbirds are rough today

lonely as a dry and used orchard
spread over the earth
for use and surrender.
shot down like an ex-pug selling
dailies on the corner.
taken by tears like
an aging chorus girl
who has gotten her last check.
a hanky is in order your lord your
worship.
the blackbirds are rough today
like
ingrown toenails
in an overnight
jail—
wine wine whine,
the blackbirds run around and
fly around
harping about
Spanish melodies and bones.
and everywhere is
nowhere—
the dream is as bad as
flapjacks and flat tires:
why do we go on
with our minds and
pockets full of
dust
like a bad boy just out of
school—

you tell
me,
you who were a hero in some
revolution
you who teach children
you who drink with calmness
you who own large homes
and walk in gardens
you who have killed a man and own a
beautiful wife
you tell me
why I am on fire like old dry
garbage.
  we might surely have some interesting
correspondence.
it will keep the mailman busy.
and the butterflies and ants and bridges and
cemeteries
the rocket-makers and dogs and garage mechanics
will still go on a
while
until we run out of stamps
and/or
ideas.
  don’t be ashamed of
anything; I guess God meant it all
like
locks on
doors.

if we take—

  if we take what we can see—
the engines driving us mad,
lovers finally hating;
this fish in the market
staring upward into our minds;
flowers rotting, flies web-caught;
riots, roars of caged lions,
clowns in love with dollar bills,
nations moving people like pawns;
daylight thieves with beautiful
nighttime wives and wines;
the crowded jails,
the commonplace unemployed,
dying grass, 2-bit fires;
men old enough to love the grave.
  these things, and others, in content
show life swinging on a rotten axis.
  but they've left us a bit of music
and a spiked show in the corner,
a jigger of scotch, a blue necktie,
a small volume of poems by Rimbaud,
a horse running as if the devil were
twisting his tail
over bluegrass and screaming, and then,
love again
like a streetcar turning the corner
on time,
the city waiting,
the wine and the flowers,
the water walking across the lake

and summer and winter and summer and summer
and winter again.

another academy

how can they go on, you see them
sitting in old doorways
with dirty stained caps and thick clothes and
no place to go;
heads bent down, arms on
knees they
wait.
or they stand in front of the Mission
700 of them
quiet as oxen
waiting to be let into the chapel
where they will sleep upright on the hard benches
leaning against each other
snoring and
dreaming;
men
without.
in New York City
where it gets colder
and they are hunted by their own
kind, these men often crawl under car radiators,
drink the antifreeze,
get warm and grateful for some minutes, then
die.
but that is an older
culture and a wiser
one;
here they scratch and
wait,
while on Sunset Boulevard the

hippies and yippies
hitchhike in
$50
boots.
  out in front of the Mission I heard one guy say to
another:
“John Wayne won it.”
“Won what?” said the other guy
tossing the last of his rolled cigarette into the
street.
  I thought that was
rather good.

the poetry reading

  at high noon
at a small college near the beach
sober
the sweat running down my arms
a spot of sweat on the table
I flatten it with my finger
blood money blood money
my god they must think I love this like the others
but it’s for bread and beer and rent
blood money
I’m tense lousy feel bad
poor people I’m failing I’m failing a woman gets up
walks out
slams the door
  a dirty poem
somebody told me not to read dirty poems
here it’s too late.
  my eyes can’t see some lines
I read it
out—
desperate trembling
lousy they can’t hear my voice
and I say,
I quit, that’s it, I’m
finished.
  and later in my room
there’s scotch and beer:
the blood of a
coward.

this then
will be my destiny:
scrabbling for pennies in dark tiny halls
reading poems I have long since become tired
of.
and I used to think
that men who drove buses
or cleaned out latrines
or murdered men in alleys were
fools.

the last days of the suicide kid

I can see myself now
after all these suicide days and nights,
being pushed out of one of those sterile rest homes
(of course, this is only if I get famous and lucky)
by a subnormal and bored nurse . . .
there I am sitting upright in my wheelchair . . .
almost blind, eyes rolling backward into the dark part of my skull
looking
for the mercy of death . . .
“Isn’t it a lovely day, Mr. Bukowski?”
“O, yeah, yeah . . .”
the children walk past and I don’t even exist
and lovely women walk by
with big hot hips
and warm buttocks and tight hot everything
praying to be loved
and I don’t even
exist . . .
“It’s the first sunlight we’ve had in 3 days,
Mr. Bukowski.”
“O, yeah, yeah.”
there I am sitting upright in my wheelchair,
myself whiter than this sheet of paper,
bloodless,
brain gone, gamble gone, me, Bukowski,
gone . . .
“Isn’t it a lovely day, Mr. Bukowski?”
“O, yeah, yeah . . .” pissing in my pajamas, slop drooling out of my
mouth.
2 young schoolboys run by—

  “Hey, did you see that old guy?”
  “Christ, yes, he made me sick!”
  after all the threats to do so
somebody else has committed suicide for me
at last.
  the nurse stops the wheelchair, breaks a rose from a nearby bush,
puts it in my
hand.
  I don’t even know
what it is. it might as well be my pecker
for all the good
it does.

the shower

we like to shower afterwards
(I like the water hotter than she)
and her face is always soft and peaceful
and she’ll wash me first
spread the soap over my balls
lift the balls
squeeze them,
then wash the cock:
“hey, this thing is still hard!”
then get all the hair down there—
the belly, the back, the neck, the legs,
I grin grin grin,
and then I wash her . . .
first the cunt, I
stand behind her, my cock in the cheeks of her ass
I gently soap up the cunt hairs,
wash there with a soothing motion,
I linger perhaps longer than necessary,
then I get the backs of the legs, the ass,
the back, the neck, I turn her, kiss her,
soap up the breasts, get them and the belly, the neck,
the fronts of the legs, the ankles, the feet,
and then the cunt, once more, for luck . . .
another kiss, and she gets out first,
toweling, sometimes singing while I stay in
turn the water on hotter
feeling the good times of love’s miracle
I then get out . . .
it is usually mid-afternoon and quiet,
and getting dressed we talk about what else

there might be to do,
but being together solves most of it,
in fact, solves all of it
for as long as those things stay solved
in the history of woman and
man, it’s different for each
better and worse for each—
for me, it’s splendid enough to remember
past the marching of armies
and the horses that walk the streets outside
past the memories of pain and defeat and unhappiness:
Linda, you brought it to me,
when you take it away
do it slowly and easily
make it as if I were dying in my sleep instead of in
my life, amen.

The Mockingbird

the mockingbird has been following the cat
all summer
mocking mocking mocking
teasing,
~~avaricious~~ and cocksure;
the cat crawled under rockers on porches
tail flashing
and he said something very angry to the mockingbird
which I didn't understand.
~~of course, the bird was protecting its nest.~~
I ~~understood.~~

yesterday the cat walked calmly up the driveway
with the mockingbird alive in its mouth,
wings fanned, beautiful wings fanned and flopping,
feathers parted like a woman's legs in sex,
and the bird was no longer mocking,
it was asking, it was praying
but the cat
striding down through centuries
would not listen.

I saw it crawl under a yellow car
with the bird
to bargain it to another place.

summer was over.

Charles Bukowski

the mockingbird

  the mockingbird had been following the cat
all summer
mocking mocking mocking
teasing and cocksure;
the cat crawled under rockers on porches
tail flashing
and said something very angry to the mockingbird
which I didn’t understand.
  yesterday the cat walked calmly up the driveway
with the mockingbird alive in its mouth,
wings fanned, beautiful wings fanned and flopping,
feathers parted like a woman’s legs in sex,
and the bird was no longer mocking,
it was asking, it was praying
but the cat
striding down through centuries
would not listen.
  I saw it crawl under a yellow car
with the bird
to bargain it to another place.
  summer was over.

style

  style is the answer to everything—
a fresh way to approach a dull or a
dangerous thing.
to do a dull thing with style
is preferable to doing a dangerous thing
without it.
  Joan of Arc had style
John the Baptist
Christ
Socrates
Caesar,
García Lorca.
  style is the difference,
a way of doing,
a way of being done.
  6 herons standing quietly in a pool of water
or you walking out of the bathroom naked
without seeing
me.

girl in a miniskirt reading the Bible outside my window

  Sunday. I am eating a
grapefruit. church is over at the Russian
Orthodox to the
west.
she is dark
of Eastern descent,
large brown eyes look up from the Bible
then down. a small red and black
Bible, and as she reads
her legs keep moving, moving,
she is doing a slow rhythmic dance
reading the Bible . . .
long gold earrings;
2 gold bracelets on each arm,
and it’s a mini-*suit*, I suppose,
the cloth covers her body,
the lightest of tans is that cloth,
she twists this way and that,
long young legs warm in the sun . . .
  there is no escaping her being
there is no desire to . . .
my radio is playing symphonic music
that she cannot hear
but her movements coincide *exactly*
to the rhythms of the
symphony . . .
  she is dark, she is dark
she is reading about God.
  I am God.

the shoelace

a woman, a tire that's flat, a
disease, a
desire; fears in front of you,
fears that hold so still
you can study them
like pieces on a
chessboard . . .
it's not the large things that
send a man to a
madhouse . . . death he's ready for, or
murder, incest, robbery, fire, flood . . .
no, it's the continuing series of *small* tragedies
that send a man to the
madhouse . . .
not the death of his love
but a shoelace that snaps
with no time left . . .
the dread of life
is that huge swarm of trivial shit
that can kill quicker than cancer
and which is always there—
license plates or taxes
or expired driver's license,
or hiring or firing,
doing it or having it done to you, or
farts or constipation
or speeding tickets
or rickets or crickets or mice or termites or
roaches or flies or a
broken hook on a

screen, or out of gas
or too much gas,
the sink's stopped-up, the landlord's drunk,
the president doesn't care and the governor's
crazy.
lightswitch broken, mattress like a porcupine;
$105 for a tune-up, carburetor and fuel pump at
Sears Roebuck;
and the phone bill's up and the market's
down
and the toilet chain is broken,
and the light has burned out—
the hall light, the front light, the back light,
the inner light; it's
darker than hell
and twice as
expensive.
then there's always crabs and ingrown toenails
and people who insist they're
your friends;
there's always that and worse:
clap, Christ and Christmas;
blue salami, 9 day rains,
50 cent avocados
and purple
liverwurst.
  or making it
as a waitress at Norm's on the split shift,
or as an emptier of
bedpans,
or as a carwash or a busboy
or a stealer of old lady's purses
leaving them screaming on the sidewalks
with broken arms at the age of
80.

suddenly
2 red lights in your rear view mirror
and blood in your
underwear;
and toothache, and $979 for a bridge
$300 for a gold
tooth,
and China and Russia and America, and
long hair and short hair and no
hair, and beards and no
beards, and faces and no
faces, and plenty of *zigzag* but no
pot, except maybe one to piss in and
the other one around your
gut.
with each broken shoelace
out of one hundred broken shoelaces,
one man, one woman, one
thing
enters a
madhouse.
so be careful
when you
bend over.

those sons of bitches

the dead come running sideways
holding toothpaste ads,
the dead are drunk on New Year’s Eve
satisfied at Christmas
thankful on Thanksgiving
bored on the 4th of July
loafing on Labor Day
confused at Easter
cloudy at funerals
clowning at hospitals
nervous at birth;
the dead shop for stockings and shorts
and belts and rugs and vases and
coffeetables,
the dead dance with the dead
the dead sleep with the dead
the dead eat with the dead.
the dead get hungry looking at hogs’ heads.
the dead get rich
the dead get deader those sons of bitches this graveyard above the ground
one tombstone for the mess,
I say:
humanity, you never had it
from the beginning.

hot

she was hot, she was so hot
I didn’t want anybody else to have her,
and if I didn’t get home on time
she’d be gone, and I couldn’t bear that—
I’d go mad . . .
it was foolish I know, childish,
but I was caught in it, I was caught.
I delivered all the mail
and then Henderson put me on the night pickup run
in an old army truck,
the damn thing began to heat halfway through the run
and the night went on
me thinking about my hot Miriam
and jumping in and out of the truck
filling mailsacks
the engine continuing to heat up
the temperature needle was at the top
HOT HOT
like Miriam.
I leaped in and out
3 more pickups and into the station
I’d be, my car
waiting to get me to Miriam who sat on my blue couch
with scotch on the rocks
crossing her legs and swinging her ankles
like she did,
2 more stops . . .
the truck stalled at a traffic light, it was hell
kicking it over

again . . .
I had to be home by 8, 8 was the deadline for Miriam.
  I made the last pickup and the truck stalled at a signal
½ block from the station . . .
it wouldn't start, it couldn't start . . .
I locked the doors, pulled the key and ran down to the
station . . .
I threw the keys down . . . signed out . . .
"your god damned truck is stalled at the signal,
Pico and Western . . ."
  . . . I ran down the hall, put the key into the door,
opened it . . . her drinking glass was there, and a note:

sun of a bitch:
I wated until 5 after ate
you don't love me
you sun of a bitch
somebody will love me
I been wateing all day
Miriam
  I poured a drink and let the water run into the tub
there were 5,000 bars in town
and I'd make 25 of them
looking for Miriam
  her purple teddy bear held the note
as he leaned against a pillow
  I gave the bear a drink, myself a drink
and got into the hot
water.

trouble with Spain

  I got in the shower
and burned my balls
last Wednesday.
  met this painter called Spain,
no, he was a cartoonist,
well, I met him at a party
and everybody got mad at me
because I didn't know who he was
or what he did.
  he was rather a handsome guy
and I guess he was jealous because
I was so ugly.
they told me his name
and he was leaning against the wall
looking handsome, and I said:
"hey, Spain, I like that name: Spain.
but I don't like you. why don't we step out
in the garden and I'll kick the shit out of your
ass?"
  this made the hostess angry
and she walked over and rubbed his pecker
while I went to the crapper
and heaved.
  but everybody's angry at me.
Bukowski, he can't write, he's had it.
washed-up. look at him drink.
he never used to come to parties.
now he comes to parties and drinks everything
up and insults real talent.
I used to admire him when he cut his wrists

and when he tried to kill himself with
gas. look at him now leering at that 19 year old
girl, and you know he
can’t get it up.
  I not only burnt my balls in that shower
last Wednesday, I spun around to get out of the burning
water and burnt my bunghole
too.

a radio with guts

  it was on the 2nd floor on Coronado Street
I used to get drunk
and throw the radio through the window
while it was playing, and, of course,
it would break the glass in the window
and the radio would sit out there on the roof
still playing
and I’d tell my woman,
“Ah, what a marvelous radio!”
  the next morning I’d take the window
off the hinges
and carry it down the street
to the glass man
who would put in another pane.
  I kept throwing that radio through the window
each time I got drunk
and it would sit out there on the roof
still playing—
a most magic radio
a radio with guts,
and each morning I’d take the window
back to the glass man.
  I don’t remember how it ended exactly
though I do remember
we finally moved out.
there was a woman downstairs who worked in
the garden in her bathing suit
and her husband complained he couldn’t sleep nights
because of me
so we moved out

and in the next place
I either forgot to throw the radio out the window
or I didn’t feel like it
anymore.
  I do remember missing the woman who worked in the
garden in her bathing suit,
she really dug with that trowel
and she put her behind up in the air
and I used to sit in the window
and watch the sun shine all over that thing
  while the music played.

love poem to Marina

  my girl is 8
and that’s old enough to know
better or worse or
anything
so I relax around her and
hear various astounding things
about sex
life in general and life in particular;
mostly it’s very
easy
except I became a father when most men
become grandfathers, I am a very late starter
in everything,
and I stretch on the grass and sand
and she rips dandelions up
and places them in my
hair
while I doze in the sea breeze.
I awaken
shake
say, “what the hell?”
and flowers fall over my eyes and over my nose
and over my lips.
I brush them away
and she sits above me
giggling.
  daughter,
right or wrong,
I do love you,
it’s only that sometimes I act as if

you weren’t there,
but there have been fights with women
notes left on dressers
factory jobs
flat tires in Compton at 3 a.m.,
all those things that keep people from
knowing each other and
worse than
that.
  thanks for the
flowers.

some people never go crazy

some people never go crazy.
me, sometimes I’ll lie down behind the couch
for 3 or 4 days.
they’ll find me there.
it’s Cherub, they’ll say, and
pour wine down my throat
rub my chest
sprinkle me with oils.
then I’ll rise with a roar,
rant, rage—
curse them and the universe
as I send them scattering over the
lawn.
I’ll feel much better,
sit down to toast and eggs,
hum a little tune,
suddenly become as lovable as a
pink
overfed whale.
some people never go crazy.
what truly horrible lives
they must live.

the fisherman

he comes out at 7:30 a.m. every day
with 3 peanut butter sandwiches, and
there's one can of beer
which he floats in the baitbucket.
he fishes for hours with a small trout pole
three-quarters of the way down the pier.
he's 75 years old and the sun doesn't tan him,
and no matter how hot it gets
the brown and green lumberjack stays on.
he catches starfish, baby sharks, and mackerel;
he catches them by the dozen,
speaks to nobody.
sometime during the day
he drinks his can of beer.
at 6 p.m. he gathers his gear and his catch
walks down the pier
across several streets
where he enters a small Santa Monica apartment
goes to the bedroom and opens the evening paper
as his wife throws the starfish, the sharks, the mackerel
into the garbage.
he lights his pipe
and waits for dinner.

the trash men

here they come
these guys
gray truck
radio playing they are in a hurry it’s quite exciting:
shirt open
bellies hanging out they run out the trash bins
roll them out to the fork lift
and then the truck grinds it upward
with far too much sound . . .
they had to fill out application forms
to get these jobs
they are paying for homes and
drive late model cars they get drunk on Saturday night now in the Los Angeles sunshine
they run back and forth with their trash bins all that trash goes somewhere
and they shout to each other then they are all up in the truck
driving west toward the sea none of them know
that I am alive REX DISPOSAL CO.

face of a political candidate on a street billboard

there he is:
not too many hangovers
not too many fights with women
not too many flat tires
never a thought of suicide not more than three toothaches
never missed a meal
never in jail
never in love 4 pairs of shoes a son in college a car one year old insurance policies a very green lawn garbage cans with tight lids he’ll be elected.

the proud thin dying

I see old people on pensions in the
supermarkets and they are thin and they are
proud and they are dying
they are starving on their feet and saying
nothing. long ago, among other lies,
they were taught that silence was
bravery. now, having worked a lifetime,
inflation has trapped them. they look around
steal a grape
chew on it. finally they make a tiny
purchase, a day’s worth.
another lie they were taught:
thou shalt not steal.
they’d rather starve than steal
(one grape won’t save them)
and in tiny rooms
while reading the market ads
they’ll starve
they’ll die without a sound
pulled out of roominghouses
by young blond boys with long hair
who’ll slide them in
and pull away from the curb, these
boys
handsome of eye
thinking of Vegas and pussy and
victory.
it’s the order of things: each one
gets a taste of honey
then the knife.

an almost made up poem

I see you drinking at a fountain with tiny
blue hands, no, your hands are not tiny
they are small, and the fountain is in France
where you wrote me that last letter and
I answered and never heard from you again.
you used to write insane poems about
ANGELS AND GOD, all in upper case, and you
knew famous artists and most of them
were your lovers, and I wrote back, it’s all right,
go ahead, enter their lives, I’m not jealous
because we’ve never met. we got close once in
New Orleans, one half block, but never met, never
touched. so you went with the famous and wrote
about the famous, and, of course, what you found out
is that the famous are worried about
their fame—not the beautiful young girl in bed
with them, who gives them *that,* and then awakens
in the morning to write upper case poems about
ANGELS AND GOD. we know God is dead, they’ve told
us, but listening to you I wasn’t sure. maybe
it was the upper case. you were one of the
best female poets alive and I told some of the
editors, “print her, print her, she’s mad but she’s
magic. there’s no lie in her fire.” I loved you
like a man loves a woman he never touches, only
writes to, keeps little photographs of. I would have
loved you more if I had sat in a small room rolling a
cigarette and listened to you piss in the bathroom,
but that didn’t happen. your letters got sadder.
your lovers betrayed you. kid, I wrote back, all

lovers betray. it didn’t help. you said
you had a crying bench and it was by a bridge and
the bridge was over a river and you sat on the crying
bench every night and wept for the lovers who had
hurt and forgotten you. I wrote back but never
heard again. a friend wrote me of your suicide
3 or 4 months after it happened. if I had met you
I would probably have been unfair to you or you
to me. it was best like this.

a love poem for all the women I have known

  all the women
all their kisses the
different ways they love and
talk and need.
  their ears they all have
ears and
throats and dresses
and shoes and
automobiles and ex-
husbands.
  mostly
the women are very
warm they remind me of
buttered toast with the butter
melted
in.
  there is a look in the
eye: they have been
taken they have been
fooled. I don’t know quite what to
do for
them.
  I am
a fair cook a good
listener
but I never learned to
dance—I was busy
then with larger things.
  but I’ve enjoyed their different
beds

smoking cigarettes
staring at the
ceilings. I was neither vicious nor
unfair. only
a student.
  I know they all have these
feet and barefoot they go across the floor as
I watch their bashful buttocks in the
dark. I know that they like me, some even
love me
but I love very
few.
  some give me oranges and pills;
others talk quietly of
childhood and fathers and
landscapes; some are almost
crazy but none of them are without
meaning; some love
well, others not
so; the best at sex are not always the
best in other
ways; each has limits as I have
limits and we learn
each other
quickly.
  all the women all the
women all the
bedrooms
the rugs the
photos the
curtains, it’s
something like a church only
at times there’s
laughter.
  those ears those
arms those

elbows those eyes
looking the fondness and
the waiting I have been
held I have been
held.

art

as the
spirit
wanes
the
form
appears.

what they want

Vallejo writing about ultimate
loneliness while starving to
death;
Van Gogh’s ear rejected by a
whore;
Rimbaud running off to Africa
to look for gold and finding
an incurable case of syphilis;
Beethoven gone deaf;
Pound dragged through the streets
in a cage;
Chatterton taking rat poison;
Hemingway’s brains dropping into
the orange juice;
Pascal cutting his wrists
in the bathtub;
Artaud locked up with the mad;
Dostoevsky stood up against a wall;
Crane jumping into a boat propeller
while in his pajamas;
Lorca shot in the road by Spanish
troops;
Berryman jumping off a bridge;
Burroughs shooting his wife;
Mailer knifing his.
—that’s what they want:
a God damned show
a lit billboard
in the middle of hell.
that’s what they want,

that bunch of
dull
inarticulate
safe
dreary
admirers of
carnivals.

one for the shoeshine man

the balance is in the snails climbing the
Santa Monica cliffs;
the luck is in walking down Western Avenue
and having one of the girls from a massage
parlor holler at you, “Hello, Sweetie!”
the miracle is in having five women in love
with you at the age of 55,
and the goodness is that you are only able
to love one of them.
the gift is in having a daughter more gentle
than you are, whose laughter is finer
than yours.
the placidity is in being able to drive a
blue 67 Volks through the streets like a
teenager, the radio on to The Host Who Loves You
Most, feeling the sun, feeling the solid hum
of the rebuilt motor
as you needle through traffic
pissing-off the dead.
the grace is in being able to like rock music,
symphony music, jazz . . .
anything that contains the joy of original
energy.
and the mathematic that returns
is the deep blue low
yourself flat upon yourself
within the guillotine walls—
angry at the sound of the phone
or anybody’s footsteps passing;
and the other mathematic:

the imminent lilting high that follows
making the guys who sit on the benches
outside the taco stands
look like gurus
making the girl at the checkstand in the
supermarket look like
Marilyn
like Zsa Zsa
like Jackie before they got her Harvard lover
like the girl in high school that
all us boys followed home.
  and the neatness which makes you believe
in something else besides death
is Sandy Hawley bringing in
five winners at Hollywood Park on off-form horses,
none of them favorites,
or somebody in a car approaching you
on a street too narrow,
and he or she pulls aside to let you
by, or the old fighter Beau Jack
shining shoes
after blowing the entire bankroll
on parties
on women
on parasites,
humming, blowing on the leather,
working the rag,
looking up and saying:
“what the hell, I had it for a
while, that beats the
other.”
  I act very bitter sometimes
but the taste has often been
sweet, it’s only that I’ve
feared to say it. it’s like
when your woman says,

“tell me you love me,” and
you can’t say it.
  if you ever see me grinning from
my blue Volks
running a yellow light
driving straight into the sun
without dark shades
I will only be locked into the
afternoon of a
crazy life
thinking of trapeze artists
of midgets with big cigars
of a Russian winter in the early forties
of Chopin with his bag of Polish soil
or an old waitress bringing me an extra
cup of coffee and seeming to laugh at me
as she does so.
  the best of you
I like more than you think.
the others don’t count
except that they have fingers and heads
and some of them eyes
and most of them legs
and all of them
good and bad dreams
and a way to go.
  the balance is everywhere and it’s working
and the machineguns and the frogs
and the hedges will tell you
so.

the meek have inherited

  if I suffer at this
typewriter
think how I'd feel
among the lettuce-pickers
of Salinas?
  I think of the men
I've known in
factories
with no way to
get out—
choking while living
choking while laughing
at Bob Hope or Lucille
Ball
while 2 or 3 children
beat tennis balls against
the walls.
  some suicides are never
recorded.

who in the hell is Tom Jones?

  I was shacked
with a 24 year old
girl from New York
City for two weeks,
along about the time
of the garbage strike
out there, and one night
this 34-year-old woman
arrived and she said,
“I want to see my rival,”
and she did and then
she said, “o, you’re a
cute little thing!”
next I knew there was a
whirling of wildcats—
such screaming and scratching,
wounded animal moans,
blood and piss . . .
  I was drunk and in my
shorts. I tried to
separate them and fell,
wrenched my knee. then
they were through the
door and down the walk
and out in the street.
  squadcars full of cops
arrived. a police helicopter
circled overhead.
  I stood in the bathroom
and grinned in the mirror.

it’s not often at the
age of 55
that such splendid
action occurs.
it was better than the
Watts riots.
  then the 34-year-old
came back in. she had pissed
all over herself and her
clothing was torn and
she was followed by 2 cops
who wanted to know
why.
  pulling up my shorts
I tried to explain.

and a horse with greenblue eyes walks on the sun

  what you see is what you see:
madhouses are rarely
on display.
  that we still walk about and
scratch ourselves and light
cigarettes is more the miracle
than bathing beauties
than roses and the moth.
  to sit in a small room
and drink a can of beer
and roll a cigarette
while listening to Brahms
on a small red radio is to have come back
from a dozen wars
alive listening to the sound
of the refrigerator as the Pope hangs
the bathing beauties rot
  and the oranges and apples
roll away.

an acceptance slip

  16 years old
during the Depression
I’d come home drunk
and all my clothing—
shorts, shirts, stockings,
suitcase, and pages of
short stories
would be thrown on the
front lawn and about the
street.
  my mother would be waiting
behind a tree:
“Henry, Henry, don’t
go in . . . he’ll
kill you, he’s read
your stories . . .”
  “I can whip his
ass . . .”
  “Henry, please take
this . . . and
find yourself a room.”
  but it worried him
that I might not
finish high school
so I’d be back
again.
  one evening he walked in
with the pages of
one of my short stories
(which I had never submitted

to him)
and he said, “this is
a great short story,”
and I said, “o.k.,”
and he handed it to me
and I read it.
it was a story about
a rich man
who had a fight with
his wife and had
gone out into the night
for a cup of coffee
and had noticed
the waitress and the spoons
and forks and the
salt and pepper shakers
and the neon sign
in the window
and then had gone back
to his stable
to see and touch his
favorite horse
who then
kicked him in the head
and killed him.
  somehow
the story held
meaning for him
though
when I had written it
I had no idea
of what I was
writing about.
  so I told him,
“o.k., old man, you can
have it.”

and he took it
and walked out
and closed the door.
I guess that’s
as close
as we ever got.

the end of a short affair

  I tried it standing up
this time.
it usually doesn't
work
this time it seemed
to be . . .
  she kept saying,
"oh my god, you've got
beautiful legs!"
  it was all right
until she took her feet off the
ground
and wrapped her legs
around my center.
  "oh my god, you've got
beautiful legs!"
  she weighed about 138
pounds and hung there as I
worked.
  it was when I climaxed
that I felt the pain
fly straight up my
spine.
  I dropped her on the
couch and walked around
the room.
the pain remained.
  "look," I told her,
"you'd better go. I've got

to develop some film
in my dark room."
  she dressed and left
and I walked into the
kitchen for a glass of
water. I got a glass full
in my left hand.
the pain ran up behind my
ears and
I dropped the glass
which broke on the floor.
  I got into a tub full of
hot water and Epsom salts.
I just got stretched out
when the phone rang.
as I tried to straighten
my back
the pain extended to my
neck and arms.
I flopped about,
gripped the sides of the tub,
got out
with shots of green and yellow
and red light
whirling in my head.
  the phone kept ringing.
I picked it up.
"hello?"
  "I LOVE YOU!" she said.
  "thanks," I said.
  "is that all you've got
to say?"
  "yes."
  "eat shit!" she said and
hung up.

love dries up, I thought as I walked back to the bathroom, about as fast as sperm.

I made a mistake

  I reached up into the top of the closet
and took out a pair of blue panties
and showed them to her and
asked “are these yours?”
  and she looked and said,
“no, those belong to a dog.”
  she left after that and I haven’t seen
her since. she’s not at her place.
I keep going there, leaving notes stuck
into the door. I go back and the notes
are still there. I take the Maltese cross
cut it down from my car mirror, tie it
to her doorknob with a shoelace, leave
a book of poems.
when I go back the next night everything
is still there.
  I keep searching the streets for that
blood-wine battleship she drives
with a weak battery, and the doors
hanging from broken hinges.
  I drive around the streets
an inch away from weeping,
ashamed of my sentimentality and
possible love.
  a confused old man driving in the rain
wondering where the good luck
went.

$$$$$$

  I’ve always had trouble with
money.
this one place I worked
everybody ate hot dogs
and potato chips
in the company cafeteria for
3 days before each
payday.
I wanted steaks,
I even went to see the manager
of the cafeteria and
demanded that he serve
steaks. he refused.
  I’d forget payday.
I had a high rate of absenteeism and
payday would arrive and everybody would
start talking about
it.
“payday?” I’d say, “hell, is this
payday? I forgot to pick up my
last check . . .”
  “stop the bullshit, man . . .”
  “no, no, I mean it . . .”
  I’d jump up and go down to payroll
and sure enough there’d be a
check and I’d come back and show it
to them. “Jesus Christ, I forgot all about
it . . .”
  for some reason they’d get
angry. then the payroll clerk would come

around. I’d have two
checks. “Jesus,” I’d say, “two checks.”
and they were
angry.
some of them were working
two jobs.
  the worst day
it was raining very hard,
I didn’t have a raincoat so
I put on a very old coat I hadn’t worn for
months and
I walked in a little late
while they were working.
I looked in the coat for some
cigarettes
and found a 5 dollar bill
in the side pocket:
“hey, look,” I said, “I just found a 5 dollar
bill I didn’t know I had, that’s
funny.”
  “hey, man, knock off the
shit!”
  “no, no, I’m *serious,* really, I remember
wearing this coat when
I got drunk at the
bars. I’ve been rolled too often,
I’ve got this fear . . . I take money out of
my wallet and hide it all
over me.”
  “sit down and get to
work.”
  I reached into an inside pocket:
“hey, look, here’s a TWENTY! God, here’s a
TWENTY I never knew I
had! I’m
RICH!”

“you’re not funny, son of
a bitch . . .”
“hey, my God, here’s ANOTHER
twenty! too much, too too
much . . . I *knew* I didn’t spend all that
money that night. I thought I’d been
rolled again . . .”
I kept searching the
coat. “hey! here’s a ten and
here’s a fiver! my God . . .”
“listen, I’m telling you to *sit down
and shut up* . . .”
“my God, I’m RICH . . . I don’t even *need*
this job . . .”
“man, sit *down* . . .”
I found another ten after I sat down
but I didn’t say
anything.
I could feel waves of hatred and
I was confused,
they believed I had
plotted the whole thing
just to make them
feel bad. I didn’t want
to. people who live on hot dogs and
potato chips for
3 days before payday
feel bad
enough.
I sat down
leaned forward and
began to go to
work.
outside
it continued to
rain.

metamorphosis

a girlfriend came in
built me a bed
scrubbed and waxed the kitchen floor
scrubbed the walls
vacuumed
cleaned the toilet
the bathtub
scrubbed the bathroom floor
and cut my toenails and
my hair.
then
all on the same day
the plumber came and fixed the kitchen faucet
and the toilet
and the gas man fixed the heater
and the phone man fixed the phone.
now I sit here in all this perfection.
it is quiet.
I have broken off with all 3 of my girlfriends.
I felt better when everything was in
disorder.
it will take me some months to get back to
normal:
I can’t even find a roach to commune with.
I have lost my rhythm.
I can’t sleep.
I can’t eat.
I have been robbed of
my filth.

we’ve got to communicate

“he was a very sensitive man,” she told me, “and after
he split with Andrea he kept her panties under his
pillow and each night he kissed them and cried.
look at you! look at that expression on your face!
you don’t like what I just said and do you want to
know why?
it’s because you’re *afraid;* it takes a man to admit his feelings.
I see you watching women getting in and out of their
cars, hoping their skirts will climb up so you can
see their legs.
you’re like a schoolboy, a peep-freak!
and *worse* than that, you just like to *think* about
sex, you really don’t want to *do* it, it’s only
work to you, you’d rather stare and imagine.
you don’t even like to suck my breasts!
and you don’t like to see a woman doing things in the
bathroom!
is there something *wrong* with bodily functions?
don’t *you* have bodily functions?
Jesus, Christ, my sisters warned me about you!
they told me what you were like!
I didn’t believe them, hell, you *looked* like a
man!
all your books, thousands of poems, and what do you
know?
you’re afraid to look at a woman’s pussy!
all you can do is *drink*!
do you think it takes any guts to drink?
here I’ve given you 5 years of my life and what do you
do?: you won’t even *discuss* things with me!

you’re charming enough when we have a party, that is,
if you’re in the mood
you can really talk your shit
but look at you now, not a sound out of you, you just
sit in that chair over there and pour drink after
drink!
well, I’ve had it, I’m going to get myself somebody
real, somebody who can discuss things with me,
somebody who can say, ‘well, look Paula, I realize
that we are having some problems and maybe
if we talk about them we can understand each other better
and make things work.’
not *you*! *look* at you! why don’t you say something?
sure: DRINK IT DOWN! that’s all you know how to do!
tell me, what’s wrong with a woman’s pussy?
my mother left my father because he was like you,
all he did was drink and play the horses!
well, he almost went crazy after she left him.
he pleaded and pleaded and pleaded for her to come
back, he even pretended he was dying of cancer just
to get her to come see him.
that didn’t fool her—she went and got herself a decent
man, she’s with him now, you’ve met him: Lance. but no,
you don’t *like* Lance, do you?
he wears a necktie and he’s into real estate . . .
well, he doesn’t like you either. but mother loves him.
and what do *you* know about love?
it’s a dirty word to you! *love*. you don’t even ‘like’!
you don’t like your country, you don’t like movies, you
don’t like to dance, you don’t like to drive on freeways,
you don’t like children, you don’t *look* at people,
all you do is sit in a chair and drink and figure systems
to beat the horses and if there’s anything duller and
dumber than horses, you let me know, you just tell
me!
all you know how to do is to wake up sick each morning,

you can't get out of bed until noon; you drink whiskey,
you drink scotch, you drink beer, you drink wine, you
drink vodka, you drink gin, and what does it mean?
your health gets worse and worse, your left thumb is
dead, your liver is shot, you have high blood pressure,
hemorrhoids, ulcers and Christ knows what else,
and when I try to talk to you, you can't take it
and you run to your place and take the phone off
the hook and put on your symphony records and drink
yourself to sleep, and then you wake up sick at noon
and phone and say that you're dying and that you're
sorry and that you want to see me, and then I come over
and you're so *contrite* you're not even human—
oh, you can be *charming* when you're sick and in trouble,
you can be humorous, you can make me laugh, you win me back
again and again . . .
but look at you *now*! all you want is one more drink and then
one *more* drink and you won't talk to me, you just keep
lighting cigarettes and looking around the room . . .
don't you *want* to work at making our relationship better?
tell me, why are you afraid of a woman's pussy?"

the secret of my endurance

I still get letters in the mail, mostly from cracked-up
men in tiny rooms with factory jobs or no jobs who are
living with whores or no woman at all, no hope, just
booze and madness.
most of their letters are on lined paper
written with an unsharpened pencil
or in ink
in tiny handwriting that slants to the
left
and the paper is often torn
usually halfway up the middle
and they say they like my stuff,
I’ve written from where it’s at, and
they recognize that. truly, I’ve given them a second
chance, some recognition of where they’re at.
it’s true, I was there, worse off than most
of them.
but I wonder if they realize where their letters
arrive?
well, they are dropped into a box
behind a six-foot hedge with a long driveway leading
to a two car garage, rose garden, fruit trees,
animals, a beautiful woman, mortgage about half
paid after a year, a new car,
fireplace and a green rug two-inches thick
with a young boy to write my stuff now,
I keep him in a ten-foot cage with a
typewriter, feed him whiskey and raw whores,
belt him pretty good three or four times
a week.

I’m 59 years old now and the critics say
my stuff is getting better than ever.

Carson McCullers

  she died of alcoholism
wrapped in the blanket
of a deck chair
on an overseas
steamer all her books of
terrified loneliness all her books about
the cruelty
of the loveless lover were all that were left
of her
  as the strolling vacationer
discovered her body notified the captain
  and she was dispatched
somewhere else
upon the ship as everything else
continued
as
she had written it.

sparks

the factory off Santa Fe Ave. was
best.
we packed heavy lighting fixtures into
long boxes
then flipped them up into stacks
six high.
then the loaders would
come by
clear your table and
you’d go for the next six.
ten hour day
four on Saturday
the pay was union
pretty good for unskilled labor
and if you didn’t come in
with muscles
you got them soon enough
most of us in
white t-shirts and jeans
cigarettes dangling
sneaking beers
management looking
the other way
not many whites
the whites didn’t last:
lousy workers
mostly Mexicans and
blacks
cool and mean

  now and then
a blade flashed
or somebody got
punched-out
  management looking
the other way
  the few whites who lasted
were crazy
  the work got done
and the young Mexican girls
kept us
cheerful and hoping
their eyes flashing
small messages
from the
assembly line.
  I was one of the
crazy whites
who lasted
I was a good worker
just for the rhythm of it
just for the hell of it
  and after ten hours
of heavy labor
after exchanging insults
living through skirmishes
with those not cool enough to
abide
we left
still fresh
  we climbed into our old
automobiles to
go to our places
to drink half the night
to fight with our women

  to return the next morning
to punch in
knowing we were
suckers
making the rich
richer
  we swaggered
in our white t-shirts and
jeans
gliding past
the young Mexican girls
  we were mean and perfect
for what we were
  hungover
we could
very damn well
do the job
  but
it didn’t touch us
ever
  those tin walls
  the sound of drills and
cutting blades
  the sparks
  we were some gang
in that death ballet
  we were magnificent
  we gave them
better than they asked
  yet
  we gave them
nothing.

the history of a tough motherfucker

he came to the door one night wet boney beaten and
terrorized.
a white cross-eyed tailless cat
I took him in and fed him and he stayed
got to trust until a friend drove up the driveway
and ran him over
I took what was left to a vet who said, “not much
chance . . . give him these pills and wait . . . his backbone
is crushed, it was crushed once before but somehow
melded, if he lives he’ll never walk again, look at
these x-rays, he’s been shot, look here, the pellets
are still in him . . . also, he once had a tail, somebody
cut it off . . .”
I took the cat back, it was a hot summer, one of the
hottest summers in decades, I put him on the bathroom
floor, gave him water and pills, he wouldn’t eat, he
wouldn’t touch the water, I dipped my finger into it
and wet his mouth and I talked to him, I didn’t go any-
where, I put in a lot of bathroom time and I talked to
him and gently touched him and he just looked back at
me with those pale blue crossed eyes as the days went
by he made his first move
dragging himself forward by his front legs
(the rear ones wouldn’t move)
he made it to the litter box
crawled over and in,
that was like the horns of chance and possible victory
blowing away in the bathroom and into the city, I
related to that cat—I’d had it bad, not that kind of
bad but bad enough . . .

one morning he got up, stood up, fell back down and he
just looked at me.
“you make it, man,” I said to him, “you’re a good one . . .”
he kept trying it, getting up and falling down, finally
he walked a few steps, he was like a drunk weaving, the
rear legs just didn’t want to do it and he fell again, rested,
then got up . . .
you know the rest: now he’s better than ever, cross-eyed,
almost toothless, all the grace is back, and that look in
the eyes never left . . .
and now sometimes I’m interviewed, they want to hear about
life and literature and I get drunk and hold up my cross-eyed
shot runover de-tailed cat before them and I say, “look, look
at *this*!”
but they don’t understand, they say something like, “you
say you’ve been influenced by Celine . . .”
“no,” I hold the cat up before them, “by what happens, by
things like this, by this, by *this*! . . .”
I wobble the cat, holding him up under the front legs in
the smokey and drunken light; he’s relaxed, he knows things . . .
it’s about then that almost all the interviews end.
although I am very proud sometimes when I see the interviews
later and there I am and there is the cat and we are photographed
together . . .
he knows it’s bullshit too but it helps get the old cat food,
right?

oh, yes

there are worse things than
being alone
but it often takes decades
to realize this
and most often
when you do
it’s too late
and there’s nothing worse
than
too late.

retirement

pork chops, said my father, I love
pork chops!
and I watched him slide the grease
into his mouth.
pancakes, he said, pancakes with
syrup, butter and bacon!
I watched his lips heavy wetted with
all that.
coffee, he said, I like coffee so hot
it burns my throat!
sometimes it was too hot and he spit it
out across the table.
mashed potatoes and gravy, he said, I
love mashed potatoes and gravy!
he jowled that in, his cheeks puffed as
if he had the mumps.
chili and beans, he said, I love chili and
beans!
and he gulped it down and farted for hours
loudly, grinning after each fart.
strawberry shortcake, he said, with vanilla
ice-cream, that’s the way to end a meal!
he always talked about retirement, about
what he was going to do when he
retired.
when he wasn’t talking about food he talked
on and on about
retirement.
he never made it to retirement, he died one day while
standing at the sink

filling a glass of water.
he straightened like he’d been
shot.
the glass fell from his hand
and he dropped backwards
landing flat
his necktie slipping to the
left.
  afterwards
people said they couldn’t believe
it.
he looked
great.
distinguished white
sideburns, pack of smokes in his
shirt pocket, always cracking
jokes, maybe a little
loud and maybe with a bit of bad
temper
but all in all
a seemingly sound
individual
  never missing a day
of work.

luck

  once
we were young
at this
machine . . .
drinking
smoking
typing
  it was a most
splendid
miraculous
time
  still
is
  only now
instead of
moving toward
time
it
moves toward
us
  makes each word
drill
into the
paper
  clear
  fast
  hard
  feeding a
closing
space.

if you want justice, take the knife

undoubtedly we are alone
forever alone
and we
belong that way,
it was never meant
to be any other way—
I wouldn’t want anybody waving fronds
over my ass
on a hot summer’s night—
I’ll take the heat
straight,
and when the time of death
arrives
the last thing I wish to see
is
a ring of human faces
about me—
better my old friends
the walls,
if they be there.
I have been alone but seldom
lonely.
I have partaken of the well
of myself
and the drinks were good,
the best I’ve had,
and tonight
sitting
staring into the darkness,
I know the darkness and the

light and the
in between.
  and in spite of finding a
similarity between most
dung and most
people
I have been nearly content
with
the offerings.
  the luck of the goodness
arrives
with accepting the
unwanted:
being born into this
fix—
the wasted gamble of our
joy,
the pleasure of
leaving—
  cry not for me
but for tears
  grieve not for me
but for grief
  read
what I’ve written
then
forget it:
  memory is a
trap: look to the walls
and begin
again.

cornered

well, they said it would come to
this: old. talent gone. fumbling for
the word hearing the dark
footsteps, I turn
look behind me . . .
not yet, old dog . . .
soon enough.
now
they sit talking about
me: “yes, it’s happened, he’s
finished . . . it’s
sad . . .”
“he never had a great deal, did
he?”
“well, no, but now . . .”
now
they are celebrating my demise
in taverns I no longer
frequent.
now
I drink alone
at this malfunctioning
machine as the shadows assume
shapes
I fight the slow
retreat now
my once-promise
dwindling
dwindling now
lighting new cigarettes

pouring more
drinks it has been a beautiful
fight still
is.

how is your heart?

during my worst times
on the park benches
in the jails
or living with
whores
I always had this certain
contentment—
I wouldn’t call it
happiness—
it was more of an inner
balance
that settled for
whatever was occurring
and it helped in the
factories
and when relationships
went wrong
with the
girls.
it helped
through the
wars and the
hangovers
the back alley fights
the
hospitals.
to awaken in a cheap room
in a strange city and
pull up the shade—
this was the craziest kind of

contentment
and to walk across the floor
to an old dresser with a
cracked mirror—
see myself, ugly,
grinning at it all.
  what matters most is
how well you
walk through the
fire.

the burning of the dream

  the old L.A. Public Library burned
down
that main library downtown
and with it went
a large part of my
youth.
  I sat on one of those stone
benches there with my friend
Baldy when he
asked,
“you gonna join the
Abraham Lincoln
Brigade?”
  “sure,” I told
him.
  but realizing that I wasn’t
an intellectual or a political
idealist
I backed off on that
one.
  I was a *reader*
then
going from room to
room: literature, philosophy,
religion, even medicine
and geology.
  early on
I decided to be a writer,
I thought it might be the easy
way

out
and the big boy novelists didn’t look
too tough to
me.
I had more trouble with
Hegel and Kant.
  the thing that bothered
me
about everybody
is that they took too long
to finally say
something lively and/
or
interesting.
I thought I had it
over everybody
then.
  I was to find two
things:
a) most publishers thought that anything
boring had something to do with things
profound.
b) that it would take decades of
living and writing
before I would be able to
put down
a sentence that was
anywhere near
what I wanted it to
be.
  meanwhile
while other young men chased the
ladies
I chased the old
books.
I was a bibliophile, albeit a

disenchanted
one
and this
and the world
shaped me.
  the old downtown library *was*
the place for me to be,
however—
at least during the days:
hungover and malnourished.
  I lived in a plywood hut
behind a roominghouse
for $3.50 a week
feeling like some Thomas
Chatterton
stuffed inside of some
Thomas Wolfe.
  my greatest problem was
stamps, envelopes, paper
and
wine,
with the world on the edge
of World War II.
I hadn't yet been
confused by the
female, I was a virgin
and I wrote from 3 to
5 short stories a week
and they all came
back
from *The New Yorker, Harper's,*
The Atlantic Monthly.
I had read where
Ford Madox Ford used to paper
his bathroom with his
rejection slips

but I didn’t have a
bathroom so I stuck them
into a drawer
until it got so fat with them
that I could barely
open it
so I took all the rejects out
and threw them
away along with the
stories.
  still
the old L.A. Public Library was
my home
and the home of many other
bums.
we discreetly used the
restrooms and wiped our
bungholes
carefully
and the only ones of
us
to be evicted were those
who fell asleep at the
library
tables—nobody snores like a
bum
unless it’s somebody you’re married
to.
  well, I wasn’t *quite* a
bum. *I* had a library card
and I checked books in and
out
rapidly, large
stacks of them
always going the full
limit

allowed and I checked my
fellows in and
out:
Aldous Huxley, D. H. Lawrence,
e.e. cummings, Conrad Aiken, Fyodor
Dos, Dos Passos, Turgenev, Gorky,
H.D., Freddie Nietzsche, Art
Schopenhauer, Robert
Green,
Ingersoll, Steinbeck,
Hemingway,
and so
forth . . .
  I always expected the librarian
to say, “nice taste there, young
man . . .”
  but the old fried and wasted
bitch didn’t even know who she
was
let alone
me.
  but those walls had some
tremendous grace: they allowed
me to discover
the early Chinese poets
like Tu Fu and Li
Po
who could say more in one
line than most could say in
thirty or
ever.
Sherwood Anderson must have
read
these
too.

I also carried the *Cantos*
in and out
and Ezra helped me
strengthen my arms if not
my brain.
that place
the old L.A. Public Library
it was a home for a person who had had
a hell of a
home
BROOKS TOO BROAD FOR LEAPING
FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD
POINT COUNTER POINT
THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER
James Thurber
John Fante
Rabelais
de Maupassant
some didn’t work for
me: Shakespeare, G. B. Shaw,
Tolstoy, Robert Frost, F. Scott
Fitzgerald
Upton Sinclair worked better for
me
than Sinclair Lewis
and I considered Gogol and
Dreiser complete
flops.
but such judgments happen more
from a man’s inbred and/or
forced manner of living than from
his
reason.
the old L.A. Public
most probably kept me from
becoming a

suicide
a bank
robber
a
wife-
beater
a butcher or a
motorcycle policeman
and even though some of these
might have some fine
qualities
it is
I think
thanks
to my luck
and my way
that this library was
there when I was
young and looking to
hold on to
something
when there seemed very
little
about.
  and when I opened the
newspaper
and read of the fire
which almost
destroyed the entire
library and most of
its contents
  I said to my
wife: “I used to hang
out
there . . .”

THE PRUSSIAN OFFICER
THE DARING YOUNG MAN ON THE FLYING TRAPEZE
TO HAVE AND HAVE NOT
YOU CAN’T GO HOME AGAIN.

hell is a lonely place

he was 65, his wife was 66, had
Alzheimer’s disease.
he had cancer of the
mouth.
there were
operations, radiation
treatments
which decayed the bones in his
jaw
which then had to be
wired.
daily he put his wife in
rubber diapers
like a
baby.
unable to drive in his
condition
he had to take a taxi to
the medical
center,
had difficulty speaking,
had to
write the directions
down.
on his last visit
they informed him
there would be another
operation: a bit more
of the inner left
cheek and a bit more

of
the tongue.
  when he returned
he changed his wife’s
diapers
put on the tv
dinners, watched the
evening news
then went to the
bedroom, got the
gun, put it to her
temple, fired.
  she fell to the
left, he sat upon the
couch
put the gun into his
mouth, pulled the
trigger
the shots didn’t arouse
the neighbors.
  later
the burning tv dinners
did.
  somebody arrived, pushed
the door open, saw
it.
  soon
the police arrived and
went through their
routine, found
some items:
  a closed savings
account and
a checkbook with a
balance of
$1.14

  suicide, they
deduced.
  in three weeks
there were two
new tenants:
a computer engineer
named
Ross
and his wife
Anatana
who studied
ballet.
  they looked like another
upwardly mobile
pair.

the strongest of the strange

you won’t see them often
for wherever the crowd is
they
are not.
these odd ones, not
many
but from them
come
the few
good paintings
the few
good symphonies
the few
good books
and other
works.
and from the
best of the
strange ones
perhaps
nothing.
they are
their own
paintings
their own
books
their own
music
their own
work.

sometimes I think
I see
them—say
a certain old
man
sitting on a
certain bench
in a certain
way
or
a quick face
going the other
way
in a passing
automobile
or
there's a certain motion
of the hands
of a bag-boy or a bag-
girl
while packing
supermarket
groceries.
sometimes
it is even somebody
you have been
living with
for some
time—
you will notice
a
lightning quick
glance
never seen
from them
before.

  sometimes
you will only note
their
presence
suddenly
in quite
vivid
recall
some months
some years
after they are
gone.
  I remember
such a
one—
he was about
20 years old
drunk at
10 a.m.
staring into
a cracked
New Orleans
mirror
  face dreaming
against the
walls of
the world
  where
did I
go?

8 count

  from my bed
I watch
3 birds
on a telephone
wire.
  one flies
off.
then
another.
  one is left,
then
it too
is gone.
  my typewriter is
tombstone
still.
  and I am
reduced to bird
watching.
  just thought I'd
let you
know,
fucker.

we ain't got no money, honey, but we got rain

call it the greenhouse effect or whatever
but it just doesn't rain like it
used to.
I particularly remember the rains of the
depression era.
there wasn't any money but there was
plenty of rain.
it wouldn't rain for just a night or
a day,
it would RAIN for 7 days and 7
nights
and in Los Angeles the storm drains
weren't built to carry off that much
water
and the rain came down THICK and
MEAN and
STEADY
and you HEARD it banging against
the roofs and into the ground
waterfalls of it came down
from the roofs
and often there was HAIL
big ROCKS OF ICE
bombing
exploding
smashing into things
and the rain
just wouldn't
STOP
and all the roofs leaked—

dishpans,
cooking pots
were placed all about;
they dripped loudly
and had to be emptied
again and
again
  the rain came up over the street curbings,
across the lawns, climbed the steps and
entered the houses.
there were mops and bathroom towels,
and the rain often came up through the
toilets: bubbling, brown, crazy, whirling,
and the old cars stood in the streets,
cars that had problems starting on a
sunny day,
and the jobless men stood
looking out the windows
at the old machines dying
like living things
out there.
  the jobless men,
failures in a failing time
were imprisoned in their houses with their
wives and children
and their
pets.
the pets refused to go out
and left their waste in
strange places.
  the jobless men went mad
confined with
their once beautiful wives.
there were terrible arguments
as notices of foreclosure
fell into the mailbox.

rain and hail, cans of beans,
bread without butter; fried
eggs, boiled eggs, poached
eggs; peanut butter
sandwiches, and an invisible
chicken
in every pot.
  my father, never a good man
at best, beat my mother
when it rained
as I threw myself
between them,
the legs, the knees, the
screams
until they
separated.
  “*I’ll kill you,*” I screamed
at him. “*You hit her again
and I’ll kill you!*”
  *“Get that son-of-a-bitching
kid out of here!”*
  “no, Henry, you stay with
your mother!”
  all the households were under
siege but I believe that ours
held more terror than the
average.
  and at night
as we attempted to sleep
the rains still came down
and it was in bed
in the dark
watching the moon against
the scarred window
so bravely
holding out

most of the rain,
I thought of Noah and the
Ark
and I thought, it has come
again.
we all thought
that.
  and then, at once, it would
stop.
and it always seemed to
stop
around 5 or 6 a.m.,
peaceful then,
but not an exact silence
because things continued to
drip
drip
drip
  and there was no smog then
and by 8 a.m.
there was a
blazing yellow sunlight,
Van Gogh yellow—
crazy, blinding!
and then
the roof drains
relieved of the rush of
water
began to expand in
the warmth:
PANG! PANG! PANG!
  and everybody got up
and looked outside
and there were all the lawns
still soaked
greener than green will ever

be
and there were the birds
on the lawn
CHIRPING like mad,
they hadn’t eaten decently
for 7 days and 7 nights
and they were weary of
berries
and
they waited as the worms
rose to the top,
half-drowned worms.
the birds plucked them
up
and gobbled them
down; there were
blackbirds and sparrows.
the blackbirds tried to
drive the sparrows off
but the sparrows,
maddened with hunger,
smaller and quicker,
got their
due.
  the men stood on their porches
smoking cigarettes,
now knowing
they’d have to go out
there
to look for that job
that probably wasn’t
there, to start that car
that probably wouldn’t
start.
  and the once beautiful
wives

stood in their bathrooms
combing their hair,
applying makeup,
trying to put their world back
together again,
trying to forget that
awful sadness that
gripped them,
wondering what they could
fix for
breakfast.
  and on the radio
we were told that
school was now
open.
and
soon
there I was
on the way to school,
massive puddles in the
street,
the sun like a new
world,
my parents back in that
house,
I arrived at my classroom
on time.
  Mrs. Sorenson greeted us
with, “we won’t have our
usual recess, the grounds
are too wet.”
  “AW!” most of the boys
went.
  “but we are going to do
something special at
recess,” she went on,

“and it will be
fun!”
well, we all wondered
what that would
be
and the two hour wait
seemed a long time
as Mrs. Sorenson
went about
teaching her
lessons.
I looked at the little
girls, they all looked so
pretty and clean and
alert,
they sat still and
straight
and their hair was
beautiful
in the California
sunshine.
then the recess bell rang
and we all waited for the
fun.
then Mrs. Sorenson told
us:
“now, what we are going to
do is we are going to tell
each other what we did
during the rainstorm!
we’ll begin in the front
row and go right around!
now, Michael, you’re
first! . . .”
well, we all began to tell
our stories, Michael began

and it went on and on,
and soon we realized that
we were all lying, not
exactly lying but mostly
lying and some of the boys
began to snicker and some
of the girls began to give
them dirty looks and
Mrs. Sorenson said,
“all right, I demand a
modicum of silence
here!
I am interested in what
you did
during the rainstorm
even if you
aren’t!”
  so we had to tell our
stories and they *were*
stories.
  one girl said that
when the rainbow first
came
she saw God’s face
at the end of it.
only she didn’t say
which end.
  one boy said he stuck
his fishing pole
out the window
and caught a little
fish
and fed it to his
cat.
  almost everybody told
a lie.

the truth was just
too awful and
embarrassing to
tell.
  then the bell rang
and recess was
over.
  “thank you,” said Mrs.
Sorenson, “that was very
nice
and tomorrow the grounds
will be dry
and we will put them
to use
again.”
  most of the boys
cheered
and the little girls
sat very straight and
still,
looking so pretty and
clean and
alert,
their hair beautiful
in a sunshine that
the world might
never see
again.

flophouse

  you haven’t lived
until you’ve been in a
flophouse
with nothing but one
light bulb
and 56 men
squeezed together
on cots
with everybody
snoring
at once
and some of those
snores
so
deep and
gross and
unbelievable—
dark
snotty
gross
subhuman
wheezings
from hell
itself.
  your mind
almost breaks
under that
sound
  and the
intermingling

stinks:
hard
unwashed socks
pissed and
shitted
underwear
  and over it all
slowly circulating
air
much like that
emanating from
uncovered
garbage
cans.
  and those
bodies
in the dark
  fat and
thin
and
twisted
  some
legless
armless
  some
mindless
  and worst of
all:
the total
absence of
hope
  it shrouds
them
covers them
totally.

  it’s not
worth
it.
  you get
up
  go out
  walk the
streets
up and
down
sidewalks
  past buildings
  around the
corner
  and back
up
the same
street
  thinking
  these men
were all
children
once
  what
has
happened
to
them?
  and what
has
happened
to
me?
  it’s dark
and cold

out
here.

the soldier, his wife and the bum

I was a bum in San Francisco but once managed
to go to a symphony concert along with the well-dressed
people
and the music was good but something about the
audience was not
and something about the orchestra
and the conductor was
not,
although the building was fine and the
acoustics perfect
I preferred to listen to the music alone
on my radio
and afterwards I did go back to my room and I
turned on the radio but
then there was a pounding on the wall:
“SHUT THAT GOD-DAMNED THING OFF!”
there was a soldier in the next room
living with his wife
and he would soon be going over there to protect
me from Hitler so
I snapped the radio off and then heard his
wife say, “you shouldn’t have done that.”
and the soldier said, “FUCK THAT GUY!”
which I thought was a very nice thing for him
to tell his wife to do.
of course,
she never did.
anyhow, I never went to another live concert
and I always listened to the radio very

quietly, my ear pressed to the
speaker.
  war has its price and millions of young men
everywhere would die
and as I listened to the classical music I
heard them making love, desperately and
mournfully, through Shostakovich, Brahms,
Mozart, through crescendo and climax,
and through the shared
wall of our
darkness.

no leaders

invent yourself and then reinvent yourself,
don’t slough in the slime.
invent yourself and then reinvent yourself,
stay out of the clutches of mediocrity and
self-pity.
invent yourself and then reinvent yourself,
change your tone and shape so that they can
never
find you.
recharge yourself.
accept continuance
but only on the terms that you have invented
and reinvented.
be self-instructed.
invent life,
it is you,
the history of its past and
the presence of its presentness.
there is nothing else,
nothing.

Dinosauria, we

  born like this
into this
as the chalk faces smile
as Mrs. Death laughs
as the elevators break
as political landscapes dissolve
as the supermarket bag boy holds a college degree
as the oily fish spit out their oily prey
as the sun is masked
  we are
born like this
into this
into these carefully mad wars
into the sight of broken factory windows of emptiness
into bars where people no longer speak to each other
into fist fights that end as shootings and knifings
  born into this
into hospitals which are so expensive that it’s cheaper to die
into lawyers who charge so much it’s cheaper to plead guilty
into a country where the jails are full and the madhouses closed
into a place where the masses elevate fools into rich heroes
  born into this
walking and living through this
dying because of this
muted because of this
castrated
debauched
disinherited
because of this
fooled by this

used by this
pissed on by this
made crazy and sick by this
made violent
made inhuman
by this
  the heart is blackened
the fingers reach for the throat
the gun
the knife
the bomb
the fingers reach toward an unresponsive god
  the fingers reach for the bottle
the pill
the powder
  we are born into this sorrowful deadliness
we are born into a government 60 years in debt
that soon will be unable to even pay the interest on that debt
and the banks will burn
money will be useless
there will be open and unpunished murder in the streets
it will be guns and roving mobs
land will be useless
food will become a diminishing return
nuclear power will be taken over by the many
explosions will continually shake the earth
radiated robot men will stalk each other
the rich and the chosen will watch from space platforms
Dante’s Inferno will be made to look like a children’s playground
  the sun will not be seen and it will always be night
trees will die
all vegetation will die
radiated men will eat the flesh of radiated men
the sea will be poisoned
the lakes and rivers will vanish
rain will be the new gold

the rotting bodies of men and animals will stink in the dark wind
the last few survivors will be overtaken by new and hideous
diseases
and the space platforms will be destroyed by attrition
the petering out of supplies
the natural effect of general decay
and there will be the most beautiful silence never heard
born out of that.
the sun still hidden there
awaiting the next chapter.

nirvana

  not much chance,
completely cut loose from
purpose,
he was a young man
riding a bus
through North Carolina
on the way to
somewhere
and it began to snow
and the bus stopped
at a little cafe
in the hills
and the passengers
entered.
  he sat at the counter
with the others,
he ordered and the
food arrived.
the meal was
particularly
good
and the
coffee.
  the waitress was
unlike the women
he had
known.
she was unaffected,
there was a natural
humor which came

from her.
the fry cook said
crazy things.
the dishwasher,
in back,
laughed, a good
clean
pleasant
laugh.
  the young man watched
the snow through the
windows.
  he wanted to stay
in that cafe
forever.
  the curious feeling
swam through him
that everything
was
beautiful
there,
that it would always
stay beautiful
there.
  then the bus driver
told the passengers
that it was time
to board.
  the young man
thought, I’ll just sit
here, I’ll just stay
here.
  but then
he rose and followed
the others into the
bus.

he found his seat
and looked at the cafe
through the bus
window.
then the bus moved
off, down a curve,
downward, out of
the hills.
the young man
looked straight
forward.
he heard the other
passengers
speaking
of other things,
or they were
reading
or
attempting to
sleep.
they had not
noticed
the
magic.
the young man
put his head to
one side,
closed his
eyes,
pretended to
sleep.
there was nothing
else to do—
just listen to the
sound of the
engine,

the sound of the
tires
in the
snow.

the bluebird

there's a bluebird in my heart that
wants to get out
but I'm too tough for him,
I say, stay in there, I'm not going
to let anybody see
you.
there's a bluebird in my heart that
wants to get out
but I pour whiskey on him and inhale
cigarette smoke
and the whores and the bartenders
and the grocery clerks
never know that
he's
in there.
there's a bluebird in my heart that
wants to get out
but I'm too tough for him,
I say,
stay down, do you want to mess
me up?
you want to screw up the
works?
you want to blow my book sales in
Europe?
there's a bluebird in my heart that
wants to get out
but I'm too clever, I only let him out
at night sometimes
when everybody's asleep.

I say, I know that you’re there,
so don’t be
sad.
  then I put him back,
but he’s singing a little
in there, I haven’t quite let him
die
and we sleep together like
that
with our
secret pact
and it’s nice enough to
make a man
weep, but I don’t
weep, do
you?

the secret

don't worry, nobody has the
beautiful lady, not really, and
nobody has the strange and
hidden power, nobody is
exceptional or wonderful or
magic, they only seem to be.
it's all a trick, an in, a con,
don't buy it, don't believe it.
the world is packed with
billions of people whose lives
and deaths are useless and
when one of these jumps up
and the light of history shines
upon them, forget it, it's not
what it seems, it's just
another act to fool the fools
again.
there are no strong men, there
are no beautiful women.
at least, you can die knowing
this
and you will have
the only possible
victory.

fan letter

I been readin' you for a long time now,
I just put Billy Boy to bed,
he got 7 mean ticks from somewhere,
I got 2,
my husband, Benny, he got 3.
some of us love bugs, others hate
them.
Benny writes poems.
he was in the same magazine as you
once.
Benny is the world's greatest writer
but he got this temper.
he gave a reading once and somebody
laughed at one of his serious poems
and Benny took his thing out right
there
and pissed on stage.
he says you write good but that you
couldn't carry his balls in a paper
bag.
anyhow, I made a BIG POT OF MARMALADE
tonight,
we all just LOVE marmalade here.
Benny lost his job yesterday, he told his
boss to stick it up his ass
but I still got my job down at the
manicure shop.
you know fags come in to get their nails
done?
you aren't a fag, are you, Mr.

Chinaski?
anyhow, I just felt like writing you.
your books are read and read around
here.
Benny says you’re an old fart, you
write pretty good but that you
couldn’t carry his balls in a
paper sack.
do you like bugs, Mr. Chinaski?
I think the marmalade is cool enough to
eat now.
so goodbye.
            Dora

to lean back into it

like in a chair the color of the sun
as you listen to lazy piano music
and the aircraft overhead are not
for war.
where the last drink is as good as
the first
and you realize that the promises
you made yourself were
kept.
that’s plenty.
that last: about the promises.
what’s not so good is that the few
friends you had are
dead and they seem
irreplaceable.
on women, you didn’t know enough
early
and too much
too late.
and if self-analysis is allowed:
nice that you turned out well-
honed,
that you arrived late
and remain generally
capable.
outside of that, not much.
except you can leave without
regret.
until then, a bit more play,
a bit more endurance,

leaning back into it,
like the dog who got across
the busy street:
not all of it was good
luck.

do you want to enter the arena?

if it doesn't come rushing out of you,
don't do it.
unless it comes bursting out of your
ears and your head and your ass
and your bellybutton,
don't do it.
if you have to sit for an hour
staring at your computer screen
or hunched over your
typewriter,
don't do it.
if you're doing it for money or
fame,
don't do it.
if you're doing it because you want
women in your bed,
don't do it.
if you have to sit there and
rework it, rewrite it,
don't do it.
if it's hard work doing it,
don't do it.
if you're trying to write like somebody
else,
don't do it.
if you have to wait for it to roar out of
you,
then wait.
if it never roars out of you,
do something else.

  if you have to read it to your wife
or your girlfriend or your boyfriend
or your parents or anybody at all,
you’re not ready.
  don’t be like so many writers,
don’t be so like so many thousands of
writers who call themselves writers,
don’t be so dull and boring and
pretentious, don’t lock in with self-love.
don’t work the pages to death with
your crap.
the libraries of the world have
yawned themselves to
sleep.
don’t add to that,
don’t do it.
unless it comes bursting through
your skull like a rocket,
unless being still about it would
drive you to madness or
suicide or murder,
don’t do it.
unless the sun inside of you is
burning your guts out,
don’t do it.
  when it is known to you truly,
it will do it by
itself and it will keep doing it
until you die or it dies in
you.
  there is no other way.
  there never was.

the condition book

the long days at the track have indented themselves
into me:
I am the horses, the jocks, I am six furlongs, seven
furlongs, I am a mile and one sixteenth, I am a
handicap, I am all the colors of all the silks, I am all
the photo finishes, the accidents, the deaths, the
last place finishers, the breakdowns, the failure of
the toteboard, the dropped whip and the numb pain
of the dream not come true in thousands and thousands
and thousands of faces, I am the long drive home in the
dark, in the rain, I am decades and decades and decades
of races run and won and lost and run again and I am
myself sitting with a program and a *Racing Form*.
I am the racetrack, my ribs are the wooden rails, my
eyes are the flashes of the toteboard, my feet are
hooves and there is something riding on my back, I am
the last curve, I am the home stretch, I am the longshot
and the favorite, I am the exacta, the daily double and
the pick 6.
I am humanely destroyed, I am the horseplayer who
became the
racetrack.

a new war

  a different fight now, warding off the weariness of
old age,
retreating to your room, stretching out upon the bed,
there’s not much will to move,
it’s near midnight now.
  not so long ago your night would be just
beginning, but don’t lament lost youth:
youth was no wonder
either.
  but now it’s the waiting on death.
it’s not death that’s the problem, it’s the waiting.
  you should have been dead decades ago.
the abuse you loaded upon yourself was
enormous and non-ending.
a different fight now, yes, but nothing to
mourn about, only to
note.
  frankly, it’s even a bit dull waiting on the
blade.
  and to think, after I’m gone,
there will be more for others, other days,
other nights.
dogs walking sidewalks, trees shaking in
the wind.
  I won’t be leaving much.
something to read, maybe.
  a wild onion in the gutted
road.
  Paris in the dark.

the laughing heart

your life is your life.
don’t let it be clubbed into dank
submission.
be on the watch.
there are ways out.
there is light somewhere.
it may not be much light but
it beats the
darkness.
be on the watch.
the gods will offer you
chances.
know them, take them.
you can’t beat death but
you can beat death
in life,
sometimes.
and the more often you
learn to do it,
the more light there will
be.
your life is your life.
know it while you have
it.
you are marvelous
the gods wait to delight
in
you.

roll the dice

if you're going to try, go all the
way.
otherwise, don't get into it.
if you're going to try, go all the
way.
this could mean losing girlfriends,
wives, relatives, jobs and
maybe your mind.
go all the way.
it could mean not eating for 3 or
4 days.
it could mean freezing on a
park bench.
it could mean jail, alcoholism,
it could mean derision,
mockery,
isolation.
isolation is the gift,
all the other is a test of your
guts,
of how much you really want to
do it.
and you'll do it
against total rejection and the
highest of odds
and it will be better than
anything else
you can think of.
if you're going to try,
go all the way.

there is no other feeling like
it.
you will be alone with the
gods
and the nights will flame with
fire.
  do it, do it, do it.
do it.
  all the way
all the way.
  you will ride death straight to
hell,
your perfect laughter,
the only good fight
now.

so now?

  the words have come and gone,
I sit ill.
the phone rings, the cats sleep.
Linda vacuums.
I am waiting to live,
waiting to die.
  I wish I could ring in some bravery.
it’s a lousy fix
but the tree outside doesn’t know:
I watch it moving with the wind
in the late afternoon sun.
  there’s nothing to declare here,
just a waiting.
each faces it alone.
  Oh, I was once young,
Oh, I was once unbelievably
young!

the crunch

  too much
too little
  too fat
too thin
or nobody.
  laughter or
tears
  haters
lovers
  strangers with faces like
the backs of
thumbtacks
armies running through
streets of blood
waving winebottles
bayoneting and fucking
virgins.
  or an old guy in a cheap room
with a photograph of M. Monroe.
  there is a loneliness in this world so great
that you can see it in the slow movement of
the hands of a clock.
  people so tired
mutilated
either by love or no love.
  people just are not good to each other
one on one.
  the rich are not good to the rich
the poor are not good to the poor.
  we are afraid.

our educational system tells us
that we can all be
big-ass winners.
it hasn’t told us
about the gutters
or the suicides.
or the terror of one person
aching in one place
alone untouched
unspoken to watering a plant.
people are not good to each other.
people are not good to each other.
people are not good to each other.
I suppose they never will be.
I don’t ask them to be.
but sometimes I think about
it.
the beads will swing
the clouds will cloud
and the killer will behead the child
like taking a bite out of an ice-cream cone.
too much
too little
too fat
too thin
or nobody more haters than lovers.
people are not good to each other.
perhaps if they were
our deaths would not be so sad.
meanwhile I look at young girls
stems flowers of chance.
there must be a way.
surely there must be a way we have not yet
thought of.
who put this brain inside of me?

  it cries
it demands
it says that there is a chance.
  it will not say
“no.”

SOURCES

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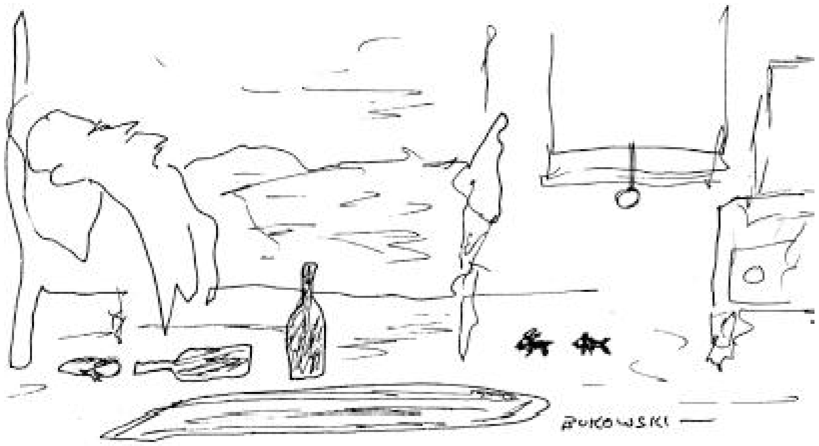
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CHARLES BUKOWSKI is one of America’s best-known contemporary writers of poetry and prose and, many would claim, its most influential and imitated poet. He was born in 1920 in Andernach, Germany, to an American soldier father and a German mother, and brought to the United States at the age of two. He was raised in Los Angeles and lived there for more than fifty years. He died in San Pedro, California, on March 9, 1994, at the age of seventy-three, shortly after completing his last novel, *Pulp*.

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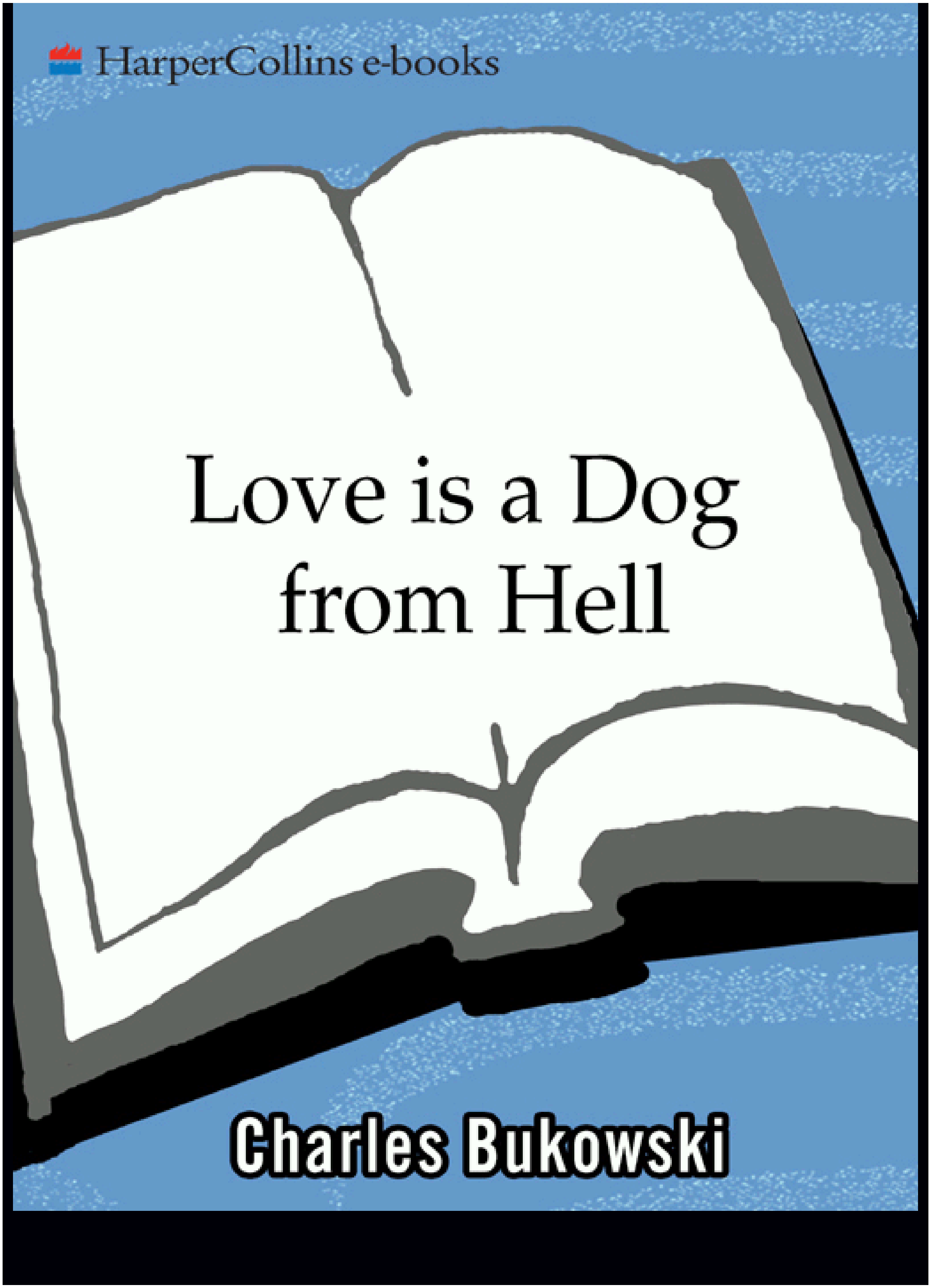
LOVE IS A DOG FROM HELL

CHARLES BUKOWSKI



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Charles Bukowski

LOVE IS A DOG FROM HELL

CHARLES BUKOWSKI

Poems 1974-1977

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to Carl Weissner

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1

one more creature dizzy with love

Sandra

is the slim tall ear-ringed bedroom damsel dressed in a long gown
she’s always high in heels spirit
pills
booze
Sandra leans out of her chair *leans* toward Glendale
I wait for her head to hit the closet doorknob as she attempts to light a new cigarette on an almost burnt-out one
at 32 she likes young neat unscratched boys with faces like the bottoms of new saucers
she has proclaimed as much to me has brought her prizes
over for me to view: silent blonde zeros of young flesh who
a) sit
b) stand
c) talk
at her command
sometimes she brings one sometimes two sometimes three for me to view
Sandra looks very good in long gowns Sandra could probably break a man’s heart
I hope she finds one.

you

you’re a beast, she said your big white belly and those hairy feet.
you never cut your nails and you have fat hands paws like a cat your bright red nose and the biggest balls I’ve ever seen.
you shoot sperm like a whale shoots water out of the hole in its back.
beast beast beast, she kissed me, what do you want for breakfast?

the 6 foot goddess

I'm big

I suppose that's why my women always seem small but this 6 foot goddess who deals in real estate and art and flies from Texas to see me and I fly to Texas to see her— well, there's plenty of her to grab hold of and I grab hold of it of her, I yank her head back by the hair, I'm real macho, I suck on her upper lip her cunt her soul

I mount her and tell her, "I'm going to shoot white hot juice into you. I didn't fly all the way to Galveston to play chess."

later we lay locked like human vines my left arm under her pillow my right arm over her side I grip both of her hands, and my chest belly balls

cock

tangle into her and through us

in the dark pass rays back and forth back and forth until I fall away and we sleep.

she's wild but kind

my 6 foot goddess makes me laugh the laughter of the mutilated who still need love, and her blessed eyes run deep into her head like mountain springs far in and

cool and good.

she has saved me from everything that is not here.

I’ve seen too many glazed-eyed bums sitting under a bridge drinking cheap wine

you sit on the couch with me tonight
new woman.
have you seen the animal-eater documentaries?
they show death.
and now I wonder which animal of us will eat the other first physically and last spiritually?
we consume animals and then one of us consumes the other, my love.
meanwhile
I’d prefer you go first the first way
since if past performance charts mean anything I’ll surely go first the last way.

sexpot

“you know,” she said, “you were at the bar so you didn’t see but I danced with this guy.

we danced and we danced close.

but I didn’t go home with him because he knew I was with you.”

“thanks a bunch,” I said.

she was always thinking of sex.

she carried it around with her like something in a paper bag.

such energy.

she never forgot.

she stared at every man available in morning cafes over bacon and eggs or later over a noon sandwich or a steak dinner.

“I’ve modeled myself after Marilyn Monroe,” she told me.

“she’s always running off to some local disco to dance with a baboon,” a friend once told me, “I’m amazed that you’ve stood for it as long as you have.”

she’d vanish at racetracks then come back and say, “three men offered to buy me a drink.”

or I’d lose her in the parking lot and I’d look up and she’d be walking along with a strange man.

“well, he came from this direction and I came from that and we kind of walked together. I didn’t want to hurt his feelings.”

she said that I was a very jealous man.

one day she just fell down

inside of her sexual organs and vanished.

it was like an alarm clock dropping into the Grand Canyon.

it banged and rattled and rang and rang but I could no longer see or hear it.

I’m feeling much better now.

I’ve taken up tap-dancing and I wear a black felt hat pulled down low over my right eye.

sweet music

it beats love because there aren’t any wounds: in the morning she turns on the radio, Brahms or Ives or Stravinsky or Mozart. she boils the eggs counting the seconds out loud: 56, 57, 58…she peels the eggs, brings them to me in bed. after breakfast it’s the same chair and listen to the classical music. she’s on her first glass of scotch and her third cigarette. I tell her I must go to the racetrack. she’s been here about 2 nights and 2 days. “when will I see you again?” I ask. she suggests that might be up to me. I nod and Mozart plays.

numb your ass and your brain and your heart —

I was coming off an affair that had gone badly.
frankly, I was sliding down into a pit really feeling shitty and low when I lucked into this lady with a large bed covered with a jeweled canopy plus
wine, champagne, smokes, pills and color tv.
we stayed in bed and
drank wine, champagne, smoked, popped pills by the dozens
as I (feeling shitty and low) tried to get over this affair that had gone bad.
I watched the tv trying to dull my senses, but the thing that really helped was this very long
(specially written for tv) drama about spies— American spies and Russian spies, and they were all so clever and cool— even their children didn’t know their wives didn’t know, and in a way
they hardly knew— and I found out about counter-spies, double-spies: guys who worked both sides, and then this one who was a double-spy turned into a triple-spy, it
got nicely confusing—
I don’t even think the guy who wrote the script knew what was happening — it went on for hours!
seaplanes rammed into icebergs, a priest in Madison, Wisc. murdered his brother, a block of ice was shipped in a casket to Peru in lieu of the world’s largest diamond, and blondes walked in and out of rooms eating creampuffs and walnuts; the triple-spy turned into a quadruple-spy and everybody loved everybody
and it went on and on
and the hours passed and it all finally vanished like a paperclip in a bag of trash and I
reached over and flicked off the set and slept well for the first time in a week and a half.

one of the hottest

she wore a platinum blond wig and her face was rouged and powdered and she put the lipstick on making a huge painted mouth and her neck was wrinkled but she still had the ass of a young girl and the legs were good.
she wore blue panties and I got them off raised her dress, and with the TV flickering I took her standing up.
as we struggled around the room (I’m fucking the grave, I thought, I’m bringing the dead back to life, marvelous so marvelous like eating cold olives at 3 a.m.
with half the town on fire) I came.
you boys can keep your virgins give me hot old women in high heels with asses that forgot to get old.
of course, you leave afterwards or get very drunk which is the same
thing.
we drank wine for hours and watched tv and when we went to bed.
to sleep it off.
she left her teeth in all night long.

ashes

I got his ashes, she said, and I took them out to sea and I scattered his ashes and they didn’t even look like ashes and the urn was weighted with green and blue pebbles…

he didn’t leave you any of his millions?

nothing, she said.

after having to eat all those breakfasts and lunches and dinners with him? after listening to all his bullshit?

he was a brilliant man.

you know what I mean.

anyhow, I got the ashes. and you fucked my sisters.

I never fucked your sisters.

yes, you did.

I fucked one of them.

which one?

the lesbian, I said, she bought me dinner and drinks, I had very little choice.

I’m going, she said.

don’t forget your bottle.

she went in and got it.

there’s so little to you, she said, that when you die and they burn you they’ll have to add almost all green and blue pebbles.

all right, I said.

I’ll see you in 6 months! she screamed and slammed the door.

well, I thought, I guess in order to get rid of her I’ll have to fuck her other sister. I walked into the bedroom and started looking for phone numbers. all I remembered was that she lived in San Mateo and had a very good.

job.

fuck

she pulled her dress off over her head and I saw the panties indented somewhat into the crotch.
it’s only human.
now we’ve got to do it.
I’ve got to do it after all that bluff.
it’s like a party— two trapped idiots.
under the sheets after I have snapped off the light her panties are still on. she expects an opening performance.
I can’t blame her. but wonder why she’s here with me? where are the other guys? how can you be lucky? having someone the others have abandoned?
we didn’t have to do it yet we had to do it.
it was something like establishing new credibility with the income tax man. I get the panties off. I decide not to tongue her. even then
I’m thinking about after it’s over.
we’ll sleep together tonight trying to fit ourselves inside the wallpaper.
I try, fail, notice the hair on her head mostly notice the hair on her head
and a glimpse of nostrils piglike
I try it
again.

me

women don't know how to love, she told me.
you know how to love but women just want to leech.
I know this because I'm a woman.
hahaha, I laughed.
so don't worry about your breakup with Susan because she'll just leech onto somebody else.
we talked a while longer then I said goodbye hungup went into the crapper and took a good beershit mainly thinking, well, I'm still alive and have the ability to expell wastes from my body.
and poems.
and as long as that's happening I have the ability to handle betrayal loneliness hangnail clap
and the economic reports in the financial section.
with that
I stood up
wiped
flushed
then thought: it's true: I know how to love.
I pulled up my pants and walked into the other room.

another bed

another bed
another woman
more curtains
another bathroom
another kitchen
other eyes
other hair
other
feet and toes.
everybody’s looking.
the eternal search.
you stay in bed
she gets dressed for work and you wonder what happened to the last one and the one before that…
it’s all so comfortable— this love-making this sleeping together the gentle kindness…
after she leaves you get up and use her bathroom, it’s all so intimate and so strange.
you go back to bed and sleep another hour.
when you leave it’s with sadness but you’ll see her again whether it works or not.
you drive down to the shore and sit in your car. it’s almost noon.
—another bed, other ears, other ear rings, other mouths, other slippers, other dresses colors, doors, phone numbers.
you were once strong enough to live alone.
for a man nearing sixty you should be more sensible.
you start the car and shift, thinking, I’ll phone Jeanie when I get in, I haven’t seen her since Friday.

trapped

don’t undress my love you might find a mannequin; don’t undress the mannequin you might find my love.
she’s long ago forgotten me.
she’s trying on a new hat and looks more the coquette than ever.
she is a
child
and a mannequin and death.
I can’t hate that.
she didn’t do anything unusual.
I only wanted her to.

tonight

"your poems about the girls will still be around 50 years from now when the girls are gone,"
my editor phones me.
dear editor:
the girls appear to be gone already.
I know what you mean
but give me one truly alive woman tonight walking across the floor toward me
and you can have all the poems
the good ones
the bad ones
or any that I might write after this one.
I know what you mean.
do you know what I mean?

the escape

escape from the black widow spider is a miracle as great as art.

what a web she can weave slowly drawing you to her she'll embrace you then when she's satisfied she'll kill you still in her embrace and suck the blood from you.

I escaped my black widow because she had too many males in her web and while she was embracing one and then the other and then another I worked free got out to where I was before.

she'll miss me— not my love but the taste of my blood, but she's good, she'll find other blood; she's so good that I almost miss my death, but not quite; I've escaped. I view the other webs.

the drill

our marriage book, it says.
I look through it.
they lasted ten years.
they were young once.
now I sleep in her bed.
he phones her:
“I want my drill back.
have it ready.
I’ll pick the children up at ten.”
when he arrives he waits outside the door.
his children leave with him.
she comes back to bed and I stretch a leg out place it against hers.
I was young once too.
human relationships simply aren’t durable.
I think back to the women in my life.
they seem non-existent.
“did he get his drill?” I ask.
“yes, he got his drill.”
I wonder if I’ll ever have to come back for my bermuda shorts and my record album by The Academy of St. Martin in the Fields? I suppose I will.

texan

she's from Texas and weighs 103 pounds

and stands before the mirror combing oceans of reddish hair which falls all the way down her back to her ass.

the hair is magic and shoots sparks as I lay on the bed and watch her combing her hair. she's like something out of the movies but she's actually here. we make love at least once a day and she can make me laugh any time she cares to. Texas women are always healthy, and besides that she's cleaned my refrigerator, my sink, the bathroom, and she cooks and feeds me healthy foods and washes the dishes too.

"Hank," she told me, holding up a can of grapefruit juice, "this is the best of them all."

it says: Texas unsweetened PINK grapefruit juice.

she looks like Katherine Hepburn looked when she was in high school, and I watch those 103 pounds

combing a yard and some change of reddish hair before the mirror and I feel her inside of my wrists and at the backs of my eyes, and the toes and legs and belly of me feel her and the other part too, and all of Los Angeles falls down and weeps for joy, the walls of the love parlors shake— the ocean rushes in and she turns to me and says, "damn this hair!"

and I say,

"yes."

the spider

then there was the time in New Orleans

I was living with a fat woman, Marie, in the French Quarter and I got very sick.

while she was at work I got down on my knees in the kitchen that afternoon and prayed. I was not a religious man

but it was a very dark afternoon and I prayed:

"Dear God: if you will let me live, I promise You I'll never take another drink."

I kneeled there and it was just like a movie— as I finished praying the clouds parted and the sun came through the curtains and fell upon me.

then I got up and took a crap.

there was a big spider in Marie's bathroom but I crapped anyhow.

an hour later I began feeling much better. I took a walk around the Quarter and smiled at people.

I stopped at the grocery and got a couple of 6 packs for Marie.

I began feeling so good that an hour later I sat in the kitchen and opened one of the beers.

I drank that and then another one and then I went in and

killed the spider.

when Marie got home from work I gave her a big kiss, then sat in the kitchen and talked as she cooked dinner.

she asked me what had happened that day and I told her I had killed the spider. she didn't get angry. she was a good sort.

the end of a short affair

I tried it standing up this time.
it doesn’t usually work.
this time it seemed to…
she kept saying “o my God, you’ve got beautiful legs!”
it was all right until she took her feet off the ground and wrapped her legs around my middle.
“o my God, you’ve got beautiful legs!”
she weighed about 138
pounds and hung there as I worked.
it was when I climaxed that I felt the pain fly straight up my spine.
I dropped her on the couch and walked around the room.
the pain remained.
“look,” I told her, “you better go. I’ve got
to develop some film in my dark room.”
she dressed and left and I walked into the kitchen for a glass of water. I got a glass full in my left hand.
the pain ran up behind my ears and I dropped the glass which broke on the floor.
I got into a tub full of hot water and epsom salts.
I just got stretched out when the phone rang.
as I tried to straighten my back the pain extended to my neck and arms.
I flopped about gripped the sides of the tub got out with shots of green and yellow and red light flashing in my head.
the phone kept ringing.
I picked it up.
“hello?”
“I LOVE YOU!” she said.
“thanks,” I said.
“is that all you’ve got to say?”
“yes.”
“eat shit!” she said and hung up.

love dries up, I thought as I walked back to the bathroom, even faster than sperm.

moaning and groaning

she writes: you’ll be moaning and groaning in your poems about how I fucked those 2 guys last week.

I know you.

she writes on to say that my vibe machine was right— she had just fucked a third guy but she knows I don’t want to hear who, why or how. she closes her letter, “Love.”

rats and roaches have triumphed again.

here it comes running with a slug in its mouth, it’s singing old love songs.

close the windows moan close the doors groan.

an almost made up poem

I see you drinking at a fountain with tiny blue hands, no, your hands are not tiny they are small, and the fountain is in France where you wrote me that last letter and I answered and never heard from you again.

you used to write insane poems about

ANGELS AND GOD, all in upper case, and you knew famous artists and most of them were your lovers, and I wrote back, it’s all right, go ahead, enter their lives, I’m not jealous because we’ve never met. we got close once in New Orleans, one half block, but never met, never touched. so you went with the famous and wrote about the famous, and, of course, what you found out is that the famous are worried about their fame—not the beautiful young girl in bed with them, who gives them *that*, and then awakens in the morning to write upper case poems about ANGELS AND GOD. we know God is dead, they’ve told us, but listening to you I wasn’t sure. maybe it was the upper case. you were one of the best female poets and I told the publishers, editors, “print her, print her, she’s mad but she’s magic. there’s no lie in her fire.” I loved you like a man loves a woman he never touches, only writes to, keeps little photographs of. I would have loved you more if I had sat in a small room rolling a cigarette and listened to you piss in the bathroom, but that didn’t happen. your letters got sadder.

your lovers betrayed you. kid, I wrote back, all lovers betray. it didn’t help. you said you had a crying bench and it was by a bridge and the bridge was over a river and you sat on the crying bench every night and wept for the lovers who had hurt and forgotten you. I wrote back but never

heard again. a friend wrote me of your suicide 3 or 4 months after it happened. if I had met you I would probably have been unfair to you or you to me. it was best like this.

blue cheese and chili peppers

these women are supposed to come and see me but they never
do.
there's the one with the long scar along her belly.
there's the other who writes poems and phones at 3 a.m., saying, "I love you."
there's the one who dances with a boa constrictor and writes every four weeks, she'll come, she says.
and the 4th who claims she sleeps always with my latest book under her pillow.
I whack-off in the heat and listen to Brahms and eat blue cheese with chili peppers.
these are women of good mind and body, excellent in or out of bed, dangerous and deadly, of course— but why do they all have to live up north?
I know that someday they'll arrive, but two or three on the same day, and
we'll sit around and talk and then they'll all leave together.
somebody else will have them and I will walk about in my floppy shorts smoking too many cigarettes and trying to make drama out of no damned progress at all.

problems about the other woman

I had worked my charms on her for a couple of nights in a bar— not that we were new lovers, I had loved her for 16 months but she didn't want to come to my place "because that other woman has been there,"

and I said, "all right, all right, what will we do?"

she had come in from the north and was looking for a place to stay meanwhile rooming with her girlfriend, and she went to her rent-a-trailer and got out some blankets and said, "let's go to the park."

I told her she was crazy the cops would get us but she said, "no, it's nice and foggy,"

so we went to the park

spread out the equipment and began working and here came headlights— a squad car— she said, "hurry, get your pants on! I've got mine on!"

I said, "I can't. they're all twisted-up."

and they came with flashlights and asked what we were doing and she said, "kissing!" one of the cops looked at me and said, "I don't blame you," and after some small talk they left us alone.

but she still didn't want the bed where that woman had been, so we ended up in a dark hot motel room sweating and kissing and working but we made it all right; but I mean, after all that suffering…

we were at my place finally that next afternoon doing the same thing.

those weren't bad cops though that night in the park— and it's the first time I ever said that about cops, and,

I hope,

the last time I ever have to.

T.M.

she lived in Galveston and was into T.M.

and I went down to visit her and we made love continually even though it was very warm weather and we took mescalin

and we took the ferry to the island and drove 200 miles to the nearest racetrack.

we both won and sat in a redneck bar— disliked and distrusted by the natives— and then we went to a redneck motel and came back a day or two later and I stayed another week painted her a couple of good paintings— one of a man being hanged and another of a woman being fucked by a wolf.

I awakened one night and she wasn’t in bed and I got up and walked around saying, “Gloria, Gloria, where are you?”

it was a large place and I walked around opening door after door, and then I opened what looked like a closet door and there she was on her knees surrounded by photographs of 7 or 8 men heads shaved

most of them wearing rimless spectacles.

there was a small candle burning and I said, “oh, I’m sorry.”

Gloria was dressed in a kimono with flying eagles on the back of it.

I closed the door and went back to bed.

she came out in 15 minutes.

we began kissing,

her large tongue sliding in and out of my

mouth.

she was a large healthy Texas girl.

“listen, Gloria,” I finally managed to say, “I need a night off.”

the next day she drove me to the airport.

I promised to write. she promised to write.

neither of us has written.

Bee's 5th

I heard it first while screwing a blonde who had the biggest box in Scranton.
I listened to it again as I wrote a letter to my mother asking for 5,000 dollars and she mailed back 3 bottletops and the stems of grandpop's forefingers.
The 5th will kill you in the grass or at the track, the kitten said, walking across the popinjay rug.
if the 5th don't kill you the tenth will, said the Caliente hooker.
as they ran up the beautiful catsup red flag 93 thieves wept in the purple dust.
the 5th is like an ant in a breakfastnook full of swaggersticks and june bugs sucking
dawn's orange juice coming.
and I took the 3 bottletops from my mother and
ate them
wrapped in pages from Cosmopolitan magazine.
but I *am* tired of the 5th and I told this to a woman in Ohio once. I had just packed coal up 3 flights of stairs I was drunk and dizzy, and she said:
how can you say you don't care for something greater than you'll ever be?
and I said:
that's easy.
and she sat in a green chair and I sat in a red chair and after that we never made love again.

103 degrees

she cut my toenails the night before, and in the morning she said, “I think I’ll just lay here all day.”

which meant she wasn’t going to work.

she was at my apartment—which meant another day and another night.

she was a good person

but she had just told me that she wanted to have a child, wanted marriage, and it was 103 degrees outside.

when I thought of *another* child and *another* marriage I really began to feel bad.

I had resigned myself to dying alone in a small room— now she was trying to reshape my master plan.

besides she always slammed my car door too loud and ate with her head too close to the table.

this day we had gone to the post office, a department store and then to a sandwich place for lunch.

I already felt married. driving back in I almost ran into a Cadillac.

“let’s get drunk,” I said.

“no, no,” she answered, “it’s too early.”

and then she slammed the car door.

it was still 103 degrees.

when I opened my mail I found my auto insurance company wanted $76 more.

suddenly she ran into the room and screamed, “LOOK, I’M

TURNING RED! ALL BLOTCHY! WHAT’LL I DO!”

“take a bath,” I told her.

I dialed the insurance company long distance and demanded to know why.

she began screaming and moaning from the bathtub and I couldn’t hear and I said, “just a

moment, please!”

I covered the phone and screamed at her in the bathtub: “LOOK! I’M ON LONG DISTANCE! HOLD IT DOWN, FOR CHRIST’S

SAKE!”

the insurance people still maintained that I owed them $76 and would send me a letter explaining why.

I hung up and stretched out on the bed.

I was already married, I felt married.

she came out of the bathroom and said, “can I stretch out beside you?”

and I said, “o.k.”

in ten minutes her color was normal.

It was because she had taken a niacin tablet.

she remembered that it happened every time.

we stretched out there sweating: nerves. nobody has soul enough to overcome nerves.

but I couldn’t tell her that.

she wanted her baby.

what the fuck.

pacific telephone

you go for these wenches, she said, you go for these whores, I'll bore you.

I don't want to be shit on anymore, I said, relax.

when I drink, she said, it hurts my bladder, it burns.

I'll do the drinking, I said.

you're waiting for the phone to ring, she said, you keep looking at the phone.

if one of those wenches phones you'll run right out of here.

I can't promise you anything, I said.

then—just like that—the phone rang.

this is Madge, said the phone. I've got to see you right away.

oh, I said.

I'm in a jam, she continued, I need ten bucks—fast.

I'll be right over, I said, and hung up.

she looked at me. it was a wench, she said, your whole face lit up.

what the hell's the matter with you?

listen, I said, I've got to leave.

you stay here. I'll be right back.

I'm going, she said. I love you but you're crazy, you're doomed.

she got her purse and slammed the door.

it's probably some deeply-rooted childhood fuckup that makes me vulnerable, I thought.

then I left my place and got into my volks.

I drove north up Western with the radio on.

there were whores walking up and down both sides of the street and Madge looked more vicious than any of them.

225 pounds

we were in bed and
she started to fight: “you son of a bitch! you just wait a minute, I’ll get you!”
I began laughing:
“what’s the matter? what’s the matter?”
“you son of a bitch!” she screamed.
I held her hands as she squirmed.
she was a couple of decades younger than I a health food freak.
she was *very* strong.
“you son of a bitch! I’ll get you!”
she screamed.
I rolled on top of her with my 225 pounds and just layed it there on her.
“uugg, oooo, my God, that’s not *fair*, oooo, my God!”
I rolled off and walked into the other room and sat on the couch.
“I’ll get you, bastard,” she said, “you just wait!”
“just don’t bite it off,” I said, “or you’ll make a half dozen women very unhappy.”
she climbed up on the headboard of my bed (it did have a flat though narrow surface)
and sat perched there watching the news on tv.
the tv faced the bedroom and it illuminated her as she sat up there on the headboard.
“I thought you were sane,” I said, “but you’re just as crazy as the rest of them.”
“be quiet,” she said, “I want to watch the news!”
“look,” I said, “I’ll…”
“SHUSH!” she said.
and there she was up on the headboard of my bed really watching the news. I accepted her that way.

turnabout

she drives into the parking lot while I am leaning up against the fender of my car.

she's drunk and her eyes are wet with tears: "you son of a bitch, you fucked me when you didn't want to. you told me to keep phoning you, you told me to move closer into town, then you told me to leave you alone."

it's all quite dramatic and I enjoy it.

"sure, well, what do you want?"

"I want to talk to you, I want to go to your place and talk to you…"

"I'm with somebody now. she's in getting a sandwich."

"I want to talk to you…it takes a while to get over things. I need more time."

"sure. wait until she comes out. we're not inhuman, we'll all have a drink together."

"shit," she says, "oh shit!"

she jumps into her car and drives off.

the other one comes out: "who was that?"

"an ex-friend."

now *she's* gone and I'm sitting here drunk and my eyes seem wet with tears.

it's very quiet and I feel like I have a spear rammed into the center of my gut.

I walk to the bathroom and puke.

mercy, I think, doesn't the human race know anything about mercy?

one for old snaggle-tooth

I know a woman who keeps buying puzzles Chinese puzzles
blocks
wires
pieces that finally fit into some order.
she works it out mathematically she solves all her puzzles lives down by the sea puts sugar out for the ants and believes ultimately
in a better world.
her hair is white she seldom combs it her teeth are snaggled and she wears loose shapeless coveralls over a body most women would wish they had.
for many years she irritated me with what I considered her eccentricities—like soaking eggshells in water (to feed the plants so that they'd get calcium).
but finally when I think of her life and compare it to other lives more dazzling, original and beautiful I realize that she has hurt fewer
people than anybody I know (and by hurt I simply mean hurt).
she has had some terrible times, times when maybe I should have helped her more for she is the mother of my only child and we were once great lovers, but she has come through like I said she has hurt fewer people than anybody I know, and if you look at it like that, well, she has created a better world.
she has won.
Frances, this poem is for you.

communion

horses running with her miles away laughing with a fool
Bach and the hydrogen bomb and her miles away laughing with a fool
the banking system bumper jacks gondolas in Venice and her miles away laughing with a fool you’ve never quite seen a stairway before (each step looking at you separately) and outside the newsboy looking immortal
as the cars go by under a sun
like an enemy and you wonder why it’s so hard to go crazy— if you’re not already crazy
until now
you’ve never seen a
stairway that looked like a stairway a doorknob that looked like a doorknob and sounds like these sounds
and when the spider comes out and looks at you finally you don’t hate it finally
with her miles away laughing with a fool.

trying to get even:

we'd had any number of joints and some beer and I was on the bed stretched out and she said, "look, I've had 3 abortions in a row, real fast, and I'm sick of abortions, I don't want you to stick that thing in me!"

it was sticking up there and we were both looking at it.

"ah, come on," I said, "my girlfriend fucked 2 different guys this week and I'm trying to get even."

"don't get me involved in your domestic horseshit! now what I want you to do is to BEAT that thing OFF while I WATCH!

I want to WATCH while you beat that thing OFF! I want to see it shoot JUICE!"

"o.k. get your face closer."

she got it closer and I spit on my palm and began working.

it got bigger. just before I was ready I stopped, I held it at the bottom stretching it, the head throbbed purple and shiny.

"oooh," she said.

she ducked her mouth over it, sucked at it and pulled away.

"finish it off," I said.

"no!"

I whacked away and then stopped again at the last moment and held it at the bottom and waved it all around the bedroom.

she eyed it

fell upon it again sucked

and pulled away.

we alternated the process back and forth

again and again.

finally I just pulled her off the chair onto the bed

rolled on top of her stuck it in worked it

worked it

and came.

when she walked back out of the bathroom she said, "you son of a bitch, I love you, I've loved you for a long time.

when I get back to Santa Barbara I’m going to write you. I’m living with this guy but I hate him, I don’t even know what I’m doing with him.”

“o.k.,” I said, “but you’re up now. can you get me a glass of water? I’m dry.”

she walked into the kitchen and I heard her remark that all my drinking glasses were dirty.

I told her to use a coffee cup. I heard the water running and I thought, one more fuck I’ll be even and I can be in love with my girlfriend again— that is if she hasn’t slipped in an extra and she probably has.

Chicago

“I’ve made it,” she said, “I’ve come through.” she had on new boots, pants and a white sweater. “I know what I want now.” she was from Chicago and had settled in L.A.’s Fairfax district.

“you promised me champagne,”

she said.

“I was drunk when I phoned. how about a beer?”

“no, pass me your joint.”

she inhaled, let it out: “this isn’t very good stuff.”

she handed it back.

“there’s a difference,” I said, “between making it and simply becoming hard.”

“you like my boots?”

“yes, very nice.”

“listen, I’ve got to go. can I use your bathroom?”

“sure.”

when she came out she had on a large lipstick mouth. I hadn’t seen one of those since I was a boy.

I kissed her in the doorway feeling the lipstick rub off on my lips.

“goodbye,” she said.

“goodbye,” I said.

she went up the walk toward her car.

I closed the door.

she knew what she wanted and it wasn’t me.

I know more women like that than any other kind.

quiet clean girls in gingham dresses…

all I’ve ever known are whores, ex-prostitutes, madwomen. I see men with quiet, gentle women—I see them in the supermarkets, I see them walking down the streets together, I see them in their apartments: people at peace, living together. I know that their peace is only partial, but there is peace, often hours and days of peace.
all I’ve ever known are pill freaks, alcoholics, whores, ex—prostitutes, madwomen.
when one leaves
another arrives
worse than her predecessor.
I see so many men with quiet clean girls in gingham dresses girls with faces that are not wolverine or predatory.
“don’t ever bring a whore around,” I tell my few friends, “I’ll fall in love with her.”
“you couldn’t stand a good woman, Bukowski.”
I need a good woman. I need a good woman more than I need this typewriter, more than I need my automobile, more than I need Mozart; I need a good woman so badly that I can taste her in the air, I can feel her at my fingertips, I can see sidewalks built for her feet to walk upon, I can see pillows for her head, I can feel my waiting laughter,
I can see her petting a cat, I can see her sleeping,
I can see her slippers on the floor.
I know that she exists
but where is she upon this earth as the whores keep finding me?

we will taste the islands and the sea

I know that some night
in some bedroom
soon
my fingers will
rift
through
soft clean
hair
songs such as no radio
plays
all sadness, grinning
into flow.

2

me, and that old woman: sorrow

this
poet

this poet he’d been drinking 2 or 3 days and he walked out on the stage and looked at that audience and he just knew he was going to do it. there was a grand piano on stage and he walked over and lifted the lid and vomited inside the piano. then he closed the lid and gave his reading.

they had to remove the strings from the piano and wash out the insides and restring it.

I can understand why they never invited him back. but to pass the word on to other universities that he was a poet who liked to vomit into grand pianos was unfair.

they never considered the quality of his reading. I know this poet: he’s just like the rest of us: he’ll vomit anywhere for money.

winter

big sloppy wounded dog hit by a car and walking toward the curbing making enormous sounds your body curled red blowing out of ass and mouth.

I stare at him and drive on

for how would it look for me to be holding a dying dog on a curbing in Arcadia, blood seeping into my shirt and pants and shorts and socks and shoes? it would just look dumb.

besides, I figure the 2

horse in the first race and I wanted to hook him with the 9

in the second. I figured the daily to pay around $140

so I had to let that dog die alone there just across from the shopping center with the ladies looking for bargains as the first bit of snow fell upon the Sierra Madre.

what they want

Vallejo writing about loneliness while starving to death; Van Gogh's ear rejected by a whore; Rimbaud running off to Africa to look for gold and finding an incurable case of syphilis; Beethoven gone deaf; Pound dragged through the streets in a cage; Chatterton taking rat poison; Hemingway's brains dropping into the orange juice; Pascal cutting his wrists in the bathtub; Artaud locked up with the mad; Dostoevsky stood up against a wall; Crane jumping into a boat propeller; Lorca shot in the road by Spanish troops; Berryman jumping off a bridge; Burroughs shooting his wife; Mailer knifing his.

—that's what they want: a God damned show a lit billboard in the middle of hell.

that's what they want, that bunch of dull
inarticulate safe dreary
admirers of carnivals.

Iron Mike

we talk about this film: Cagney fed this broad grapefruit faster than she could eat it and then she
loved him.
“that won’t always work,” I told Iron Mike.
he grinned and said, “yeh.”
then he reached down and touched his belt.
32 female scalps dangled there.
“me and my big Jewish cock,” he said.
then he raised his hands to indicate the size.
“o, yeh, well,”
I said.
“they come around,” he said, “I fuck ’em, they hang around, I tell ’em, ‘it’s time to leave.’”
“you’ve got guts, Mike.”
“this one wouldn’t leave so I just got up and slapped her…she left.”
“I don’t have your nerve, Mike. they hang around washing dishes, rubbing the shit-stains out of the crapper, throwing out the old Racing Forms…”
“they’ll never get me,”
he said,
“I’m invincible.”
look, Mike, no man is invincible.
some day
you’ll be sent mad by eyes like a child’s crayon drawing. you won’t be able to drink a glass of water or walk across a room. there will be the walls and the sound of the streets outside, and you’ll hear machineguns and mortar shells. that’ll be when you want it and can’t have it.
the teeth
are never finally the teeth of love.

guru

big black beard tells me that I don’t feel terror
I look at him my gut rattles gravel
I see his eyes look upward
he’s strong
has dirty fingernails
and upon the walls: scabbards.
he knows things:
books
the odds the best road home
I like him but I think he lies
(I’m not sure he lies)
his wife sits in a dark **corner**
when I first met her she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen
now she has become his twin
perhaps not his fault:
perhaps the thing does us all like that
yet after I leave their house I feel terror
the moon looks diseased
my hands slip on the steering wheel
I get my car out
and down the hill
almost crash it into a blue-green parked car
clod me forever, Beatrice
wavering poet, ha haha
dinky dog of terror.

the professors

sitting with the professors we talk about Allen Tate and John Crow Ransom the rugs are clean and the coffeetables shine and there is talk of budgets and works in progress and there is a fireplace.
the kitchen floor is well-waxed and I have just eaten dinner after drinking until 3 a.m.
after reading the night before
now I'm to read again at a nearby college.
I'm in Arkansas in January somebody even mentions Faulkner I go to the bathroom and vomit up the dinner when I come out they are all in their coats and overcoats waiting in the kitchen.
I 'm to read in 15 minutes.
there'll be a good crowd
they tell me.

for Al—

don’t worry about rejections, pard, I’ve been rejected before.
sometimes you make a mistake, taking the wrong poem more often I make the mistake, writing it.
but I like a mount in every race even though the man who puts up the morning line
tabs it 30 to one.
I get to thinking about death more and more
senility
crutches
armchairs
writing purple poetry with a dripping pen
when the young girls with mouths like barracudas bodies like lemon trees bodies like clouds bodies like flashes of lightning stop knocking on my door.
don’t worry about rejections, pard.
I have smoked 25 cigarettes tonight and you know about the beer.
the phone has only rung once: wrong number.

how to be a great writer

you’ve got to fuck a great many women beautiful women and write a few decent love poems.
and don’t worry about age and/or freshly-arrived talents.
just drink more beer more and more beer
and attend the racetrack at least once a week
and win
if possible.
learning to win is hard— any slob can be a good loser.
and don’t forget your Brahms and your Bach and your ***beer***.
don’t overexercise.
sleep until noon.
avoid credit cards or paying for anything on time.
remember that there isn’t a piece of ass in this world worth over $50
(in 1977).
and if you have the ability to love love yourself first but always be aware of the possibility of total defeat whether the reason for that defeat seems right or wrong—
an early taste of death is not necessarily a bad thing.
stay out of churches and bars and museums, and like the spider be patient— time is everybody’s cross, plus exile
defeat
treachery
all that dross.
stay with the beer.
beer is continous blood.
a continuous lover.
get a large typewriter and as the footsteps go up and down outside your window
hit that thing
hit it hard
make it a heavyweight fight

make it the bull when he first charges in
and remember the old dogs who fought so well: Hemingway, Celine, Dostoevsky, Hamsun.
if you think they didn’t go crazy in tiny rooms just like you’re doing now
without women
without food
without hope
then you’re not ready.
drink more beer.
there’s time.
and if there’s not that’s all right too.

the price

drinking 15 dollar champagne— *Cordon Rouge*—with the hookers.
one is named Georgia and she doesn’t like pantyhose: I keep helping her pull up her long dark stockings.
the other is Pam-prettier but not much soul, and we smoke and talk and I play with their legs and stick my bare foot into Georgia’s open purse.
it’s filled with
bottles of pills. I take some of the pills.
“listen,” I say, “one of you has soul, the other looks. Can’t I combine the 2 of you? take the soul and stick it into the looks?”
“you want me,” says Pam, “it will cost you a hundred.”
we drink some more and Georgia falls to the floor and can’t get up.
I tell Pam that I like her earrings very much. Her hair is long and a natural red.
“I was only kidding about the hundred,” she says.
“oh,” I say, “what will it cost me?”
she lights her cigarette with my lighter and looks at me through the flame:
her eyes tell me.
“look,” I say, “I don’t think I can ever pay that price again.”
she crosses her legs inhales on her cigarette
as she exhales she smiles and says, “sure you can.”

alone with everybody

the flesh covers the bone and they put a mind in there and sometimes a soul, and the women break vases against the walls and the men drink too much and nobody finds the one but they keep looking
crawling in and out of beds.
flesh covers the bone and the flesh searches for more than flesh.
there’s no chance at all: we are all trapped by a singular fate.
nobody ever finds the one.
the city dumps fill the junkyards fill the madhouses fill the hospitals fill the graveyards fill
nothing else fills.

the 2nd novel

they’d come around and they’d ask “you finished your 2nd novel yet?”
“no.”
“whatsamatta? whatsamatta that you can’t finish it?”
“hemorrhoids and insomnia.”
“maybe you’ve lost it?”
“lost what?”
“you know.”
now when they come around I tell them, “yeh. I finished it. be out in Sept.”
“you *finished* it?”
“yeh.”
“well, listen, I gotta go.”
even the cat here in the courtyard won’t come to my door anymore.
it’s nice.

Chopin Bukowski

this is my piano.
the phone rings and people ask, what are you doing? how about getting drunk with us?
and I say,
I’m at my piano.
what?
I’m at my piano.
I hang up.
people need me. I fill them. if they can’t see me for a while they get desperate, they get sick.
but if I see them too often I get sick. it’s hard to feed without getting fed.
my piano says things back to me.
sometimes the things are scrambled and not very good.
other times
I get as good and lucky as Chopin.
sometimes I get out of practice out of tune. that’s all right.
I can sit down and vomit on the keys but it’s my
vomit.
it’s better than sitting in a room with 3 or 4 people and their pianos.
this is my piano and it is better than theirs.
and they like it and they do not like it.

gloomy lady

she sits up there drinking wine while her husband is at work.
she puts quite some importance upon getting her poems published in the little magazines.
she's had two or three of her slim volumes of poems done in mimeo.
she has two or three children between the ages of 6 and 15.
she is no longer the beautiful woman she was. she sends photos of herself sitting upon a rock by the ocean alone and damned.
I could have had her once. I wonder if she thinks I could have saved her?
in all her poems her husband is never mentioned.
but she does
talk about her garden
so we know that's there, anyhow, and maybe she fucks the rosebuds and finches before she writes her poems

cockroach

the cockroach crouched against the tile while I was pissing and as I turned my head he hauled his butt into a crack.

I got the can and sprayed and sprayed and sprayed and finally the roach came out and gave me a very dirty look.

then he fell down into the bathtub and I watched him dying

with a subtle pleasure because I paid the rent and he didn’t.

I picked him up with some greenblue toilet paper and flushed him away. that’s all there was to that, except around Hollywood and Western we have to keep doing it.

they say some day that tribe is going to inherit the earth but we’re going to make them wait a few months.

who in the hell is Tom Jones?

I was shacked with a 24 year old girl from New York City for two weeks—about
the time of the garbage strike out there, and one night my 34 year old woman arrived and she said, “I want to see my rival.” she did and then she said, “o, you’re a cute little thing!”
next I knew there was a screech of wildcats— such screaming and scratching, wounded animal moans, blood and piss…
I was drunk and in my shorts. I tried to separate them and fell, wrenched my knee. then they were through the screen door and down the walk and out in the street.
squadcars full of cops arrived. a police helicopter circled overhead.
I stood in the bathroom and grinned in the mirror.
it’s not often at the age of 55 that such splendid
things occur.
better than the Watts riots.
the 34 year old
came back in. she had pissed all over herself and her clothing was torn and she was followed by 2 cops who wanted to know why.
pulling up my shorts I tried to explain.

defeat

listening to Bruckner on the radio wondering why I’m not half mad over the latest breakup with my latest girlfriend
wondering why I’m not driving the streets drunk wondering why I’m not in the bedroom in the dark in the grievous dark pondering ripped by half-thoughts.
I suppose
that at last
like the average man: I’ve known too many women and instead of thinking, I wonder who’s fucking her now?
I think
she’s giving some other poor son of a bitch much trouble right now.
listening to Bruckner on the radio seems so peaceful.
too many women have gone through.
I am at last alone without being alone.
I pick up a Grumbacher paint brush and clean my fingernails with the hard sharp end.
I notice a wall socket.
look, I’ve won.

traffic signals

the old folks play a game in the park overlooking the sea shoving markers across cement with wooden sticks.
four play, two on each side and 18 or 20 others sit in the sun and watch I notice this as I move toward the public facility as my car is being repaired.
an old cannon sits in the park rusted and useless.
six or seven sailboats ride the sea below.
I finish my duty
come out
and they are still playing.
one of the women is heavily rouged wearing false eyelashes and smoking a cigarette.
the men are very thin very pale wear wristwatches that hurt their wrists.
the other woman is very fat and giggles each time a score is made
some of them are my age.
they disgust me
the way they wait for death
with as much passion as a traffic signal.
these are the people who believe advertisements these are the people who buy dentures on credit these are the people who celebrate holidays these are the people who have grandchildren these are the people who vote these are the people who have funerals
these are the dead the smog
the stink in the air the lepers.
these are almost everybody finally.
seagulls are better seaweed is better dirty sand is better
if I could turn that old cannon on them and make it work
I would.
they disgust me.

462-0614

I get many phonecalls now.
They are all alike.
“are you Charles Bukowski, the writer?”
“yes,” I tell them.
and they tell me that they understand my writing, and some of them are writers or want to be writers and they have dull and horrible jobs and they can’t face the room the apartment the walls that night— they want somebody to talk to, and they can’t believe that I can’t help them that I don’t know the words.
they can’t believe that often now I double up in my room grab my gut and say
“Jesus Jesus Jesus, not *again!*”
they can’t believe that the loveless people the streets the loneliness the walls
are mine too.
and when I hang up the phone
they think I have held back my secret.
I don’t write out of knowledge.
when the phone rings I too would like to hear words that might ease some of this.
that’s why my number’s listed.

photographs

they photograph you on your porch and on your couch and standing in the courtyard or leaning against your car
these photographers women with big asses which look better to you than do their eyes or their souls
—this playing at author it’s real Hemingway James Joyce stageshit
but look—
there are the books you’ve written them you haven’t been to Paris but you’ve written all those books there behind you (and others not there, lost or stolen)
all you’ve got to do is look like Bukowski for the cameras but
you keep watching those
astonishingly big asses and thinking— somebody else is getting it
“look into my eyes,”
they say and click their cameras and flash their cameras
and fondle their cameras Hemingway used to box or go fishing or to the bullfights but after they leave you jerk-off into the sheets and take a hot bath
they never send the photos like they promise to send the photos and the astonishingly big asses are gone forever and you’ve been a fine literary fellow— now alive dead soon enough
looking into and at their eyes and souls and more.

social

the blue pencil of the wave shots of yellow road
a steering wheel an insane woman sitting next to you
complaining as the ocean creams-off
and people in yellow and white campers
block your way a frantic time as you listen guilty of this and guilty of that
you admit this and that but it’s not enough
she wants splendid conquest and you’re weary of splendid conquest
getting there she climbs out walks toward the house
you piss across the fender of your car drunk on beer
little spots of you dripping down into the dust the dry
dust
zipping up you march in to meet her friends.

one to the breastplate

I have a saying, “the tough ones always come back.”
but Vera was kinder than most, and so I was surprised when she arrived that night and said, “let me in.”
“no, no, I’m working on a sonnet.”
“I’ll just stay a minute, then I’ll leave.”
“Vera, if I let you in you’ll be here for 3 or 4 days.”
it was night and I hadn’t turned the porch light on so I couldn’t see it coming but
she threw a right that exploded in the center of my chest.
“baby, that was a beautiful punch.
now move off.”
then I closed the door.
she was back again in 5 minutes: “Hank, I can’t find my car, I swear I can’t find my car. help me find my car!”
I saw my friend Bobby-the-Riff
walking by. “hey, Bobby, help this one find her car. we’ll even it up later.”
they went off together.
later Bobby said they found her car parked on somebody’s front lawn, lights on and motor running.
I haven’t heard from Vera since
unless she’s the one who keeps phoning at 2 and 3 and 4 a.m. in the morning and doesn’t answer when I say “hello.”
but Bobby says he can handle her
so I’ve decided to turn her over to Bobby.
she lives on a side street somewhere in Glendale and I help him unfold the roadmap as we sip our diet Schlitz.

the worst and the best

in the hospitals and jails it’s the worst in madhouses it’s the worst in penthouses it’s the worst in skid row flophouses it’s the worst at poetry readings at rock concerts at benefits for the disabled it’s the worst at funerals at weddings
it’s the worst at parades at skating rinks at sexual orgies it’s the worst at midnight at 3 a.m.
at 5:45 p.m.
it’s the worst
falling through the sky firing squads that’s the best
thinking of India looking at popcorn stands watching the bull get the matador that’s the best
boxed lightbulbs an old dog scratching
peanuts in a celluloid bag that’s the best
spraying roaches a clean pair of stockings natural guts defeating natural talent that’s the best
in front of firing squads throwing crusts to seagulls slicing tomatoes that’s the best
rugs with cigarette burns cracks in sidewalks waitresses still sane that’s the best
my hands dead my heart dead silence
adagio of rocks the world ablaze that’s the best for me.

coupons

cigarettes wetted with beer from the night before you light one gag
open the door for air and on your doorstep is a dead sparrow his head and breast chewed away.
hanging from the doorknob is an ad from the All American Burger consisting of several coupons which say
that with the purchase of a burger from Feb. 12 thru Feb. 15
you can get a free regular size bag of french fries and one 10 oz. cup of coca cola.
I take the ad wrap the sparrow carry him to the trash bin and dump him in.
look:
forsaking fries and coke to help keep my city
clean.

luck

what's bad about all this is watching people drinking coffee and waiting. I would douse them all with luck. they need it. they need it worse than I do.

I sit in cafes and watch them waiting. I suppose there's not much else to do. the flies walk up and down the windows and we drink our coffee and pretend not to look at each other. I wait with them.

between the movement of the flies people walk by.

dog

a single dog
walking alone on a hot sidewalk of
summer
appears to have the power
of ten thousand gods.
why is this?

trench warfare

sick with the flu drinking beer my radio on loud enough to overcome the sounds of the stereo people who have just moved into the court across the way.
asleep or awake they play their set at top volume leaving their doors and windows open.
they are each 18, married, wear red shoes, are blonde, slim.
they play everything: jazz, classical, rock, country, modern as long as it is loud.
this is the problem of being poor: we must share each other’s sounds.
last week it was my turn:
there were two women
in here
fighting each other and then they ran up the walk screaming.
the police came.
now it’s their turn.
now I am walking up and down in my dirty shorts, two rubber earplugs stuck deep into my ears.
I even consider murder.
such rude little rabbits!
walking little pieces of snot!
but in our land and in our way there has never been a chance; it’s only when things are not going too badly for a while that we forget.
someday they’ll each be dead someday they’ll each have a separate coffin and it will be quiet.
but right now it’s Bob Dylan Bob Dylan Bob Dylan all the way.

the night I fucked my alarm clock

once

starving in Philadelphia I had a small room it was evening going into night and I stood at my window on the 3rd floor in the dark and looked down into a kitchen across the way on the 2nd floor and I saw a beautiful blonde girl embrace a young man there and kiss him with what seemed hunger and I stood and watched until they broke away.

then I turned and switched on the room light.

I saw my dresser and my dresser drawers and my alarm clock on the dresser.

I took my alarm clock to bed with me and
fucked it until the hands dropped off.

then I went out and walked the streets until my feet blistered.

when I got back I walked to the window and looked down and across the way and the light in their kitchen was out.

when I think of myself dead

I think of automobiles parked in a parking lot
when I think of myself dead I think of frying pans
when I think of myself dead I think of somebody making love to you when I’m not around
when I think of myself dead I have trouble breathing
when I think of myself dead I think of all the people waiting to die
when I think of myself dead I think I won’t be able to drink water anymore
when I think of myself dead the air goes all white
the roaches in my kitchen tremble
and somebody will have to throw my clean and dirty underwear away.

Christmas eve, alone

Christmas eve, alone, in a motel room down the coast near the Pacific—hear it?
they've tried to do this place up Spanish, there's tapestry and lamps, and the toilet's clean, there are tiny bars of pink soap.
they won't find us here:
the barracudas or the ladies or the idol worshippers.
back in town
they're drunk and panicked running red lights breaking their heads open in honor of Christ's birthday. that's nice.
soon I'll finish this 5th of Puerto Rican rum.
in the morning I'll vomit and shower, drive back in, have a sandwich by 1 p.m., be back in my room by 2, stretched on the bed, waiting for the phone to ring,
not answering, my holiday is an evasion, my reasoning is not.

there once was a woman who put her head into an oven

terror finally becomes almost bearable but never quite
terror creeps like a cat crawls like a cat across my mind
I can hear the laughter of the masses
they are strong
they will survive
like the roach
never take your eyes off the roach
you’ll never see it again.
the masses are everywhere they know how to do things: they have sane and deadly angers for sane and deadly things.
I wish I were driving a blue 1952 Buick or a dark blue 1942 Buick or a blue 1932 Buick over a cliff of hell and into the sea.

beds, toilets, you and me—

think of the beds used again and again to fuck in to die in.
in this land some of us fuck more than we die but most of us die better than we fuck, and we die piece by piece too— in parks eating ice cream, or in igloos of dementia, or on straw mats or upon disembarked loves or
or.
:beds beds beds :toilets toilets toilets
the human sewage system is the world’s greatest invention.
and you invented me and I invented you and that’s why we don’t get along
on this bed any longer.
you were the world’s greatest invention until you flushed me away.
now it’s your turn to wait for the touch of the handle.
somebody will do it to you, bitch,
and if they don’t you will— mixed with your own green or yellow or white or blue or lavender goodbye.

this then—

it’s the same as before or the other time or the time before that.
here’s a cock
and here’s a cunt and here’s trouble.
only each time you think well now I’ve learned: I’ll let her do that and I’ll do this, I no longer want it all, just some comfort and some sex and only a minor love.
now I’m waiting again and the years run thin.
I have my radio and the kitchen walls are yellow.
I keep dumping bottles and listening for footsteps.
I hope that death contains less than this.

imagination and reality

there are many single women in the world with one or two or three children and one wonders where the husbands have gone or where the lovers have gone leaving behind

all those hands and eyes and feet and voices.

as I pass through their homes I like opening cupboards and looking in or under the sink

or in a closet—

I expect to find the husband or lover and he'll tell me: "hey, buddy, didn't you notice her stretch-marks, she's got stretch-marks and floppy tits and she eats onions all the time and farts…but *I'm* a handy man. I can fix things, I know how to use a turret-lathe and I make my own oil changes. I can shoot pool, bowl, and I can finish 5th or 6th in any cross-country marathon anywhere. I've got a set of golf clubs, can shoot in the 80's. I know where the clit is and what to do about it. I've got a cowboy hat with the brim turned straight up at the sides.

I'm good with the lasso and the dukes and I know all the latest dance steps."

and I'll say, "look, I was just leaving."

and I *will* leave before he can challenge me to arm-wrestling

or tell a dirty joke or show me the dancing tattoo on his right bicep.

but really

all I find in the cupboards are coffee cups and large cracked brown plates and under the sink a stack of hardened rags, and in the closet—more coathangers than clothes, and it's not until she shows me the photo album and the photos of him— nice enough like a shoehorn, or a cart in the supermarket whose wheels aren't stuck— that the self-doubt leaves, and the pages turn and there's one child on a swing wearing a red outfit and there's the other one chasing a seagull in Santa Monica.

and life becomes sad and not dangerous and therefore good enough: to have her bring you a cup of coffee in one of those coffee cups without *him* jumping out.

stolen

I keep thinking it will be outside now waiting for me blue
front bumper twisted Maltese cross hanging from the mirror.
rubber floormat twisted under the pedals.
20 m.p.g.
good old TRV 491
the faithful love of a man, the way I put her into second while taking a corner the way she could dig from a signal with any other around.
the way we conquered large and small spaces rain
sun
smog
hostility
the crush of things.
I came out of last Thursday night’s fights at the Olympic and my 1967 Volks was gone with another lover to another place.
the fights had been good.
I called a cab at a Standard station and sat eating a jelly doughnut with coffee in a cafe and waited,
and I knew that if I found the man who stole her I would kill him.
the cab came. I waved to the driver, paid for the coffee and doughnut, got out into the night, got in, and told him, “Hollywood and Western,” and that particular night was just about over.

the meek have inherited

if I suffer at this typewriter
think how I'd feel among the lettuce-pickers of Salinas?
I think of the men I've known in factories with no way to get out—choking while living choking while laughing at Bob Hope or Lucille Ball while 2 or 3 children beat tennis balls against the walls.
some suicides are never recorded.

the insane always loved me

and the subnormal.

all through grammar school junior high high school junior college the unwanted would attach themselves to me.

guys with one arm guys with twitches guys with speech defects guys with white film over one eye, cowards misanthropes killers

peep-freaks and thieves.

and all through the factories and on the bum I always drew the unwanted. they found me right off and attached themselves. they still do.

in this neighborhood now there’s one who’s found me.

he pushes around a shopping cart filled with trash: broken canes, shoelaces, empty potato chip bags,

milk cartons, newspapers, penholders…

“hey, buddy, how ya doin’?”

I stop and we talk a while.

then I say goodbye but he still follows me past the beer parlours and the love parlours…

“keep me *informed*, buddy, keep me *informed*, I want to know what’s going on.”

he’s my new one.

I’ve never seen him talk to anybody else.

the cart rattles along a little bit behind me then something falls out.

he stops to pick it up.

as he does I walk through the front door of the green hotel on the corner pass down through the hall come out the back door and there’s a cat shitting there in absolute delight, he grins at me.

Big Max

in junior high school Big Max was a problem.

we’d be sitting during lunch hour eating our peanut butter sandwiches and potato chips.

he was hairy of nostril and of eyebrow, his lips glistened with spittle.

he already wore size ten and a half shoes. his shirts stretched across a massive chest. his wrists looked like two by fours. and he walked up through the shadows behind the gym where we sat, my friend Eli and I.

“you guys,” he stood there, “you guys sit with your shoulders slumped!

you walk around with your shoulders slumped! how are you ever going to make it?”

we didn’t answer.

then Max would look at me.

“stand up!”

I’d stand up and he’d walk around behind me and say, “square your shoulders like this!”

and he’d snap my shoulders back.

“there! doesn’t that feel *better*?”

“yeah, Max.”

then he’d walk off and I’d resume a normal posture.

Big Max was ready for the world. it made us sick to look at him.

trapped

in the winter walking on my
ceiling my eyes the size of streetlamps.

I have 4 feet like a mouse but wash my own underwear—bearded and hungover and a hard-on and no lawyer. I have a face like a washrag. I sing love songs and carry steel.

I would rather die than cry. I can’t stand hounds can’t live without them.

I hang my head against the white refrigerator and want to scream like the last weeping of life forever but I am bigger than the mountains.

it’s the way you play the game

call it love

stand it up in the failing light put it in a dress pray sing beg cry laugh turn off the lights turn on the radio add trimmings: butter, raw eggs, yesterday’s newspaper; one new shoelace, then add paprika, sugar, salt, pepper, phone your drunken aunt in Calexico; call it love, you skewer it good, add cabbage and applesauce, then heat it from the left side, then heat it from the right side, put it in a box give it away leave it on a doorstep vomiting as you go into the hydrangea.

on the continent

I'm soft. I

dream too.

I let myself dream. I dream of being famous. I dream of walking the streets of London and Paris. I dream of sitting in cafes drinking fine wines and taking a taxi back to a good hotel.

I dream of

meeting beautiful ladies in the hall and turning them away because I have a sonnet in mind that I want to write before sunrise. at sunrise I will be asleep and there will be a strange cat curled up on the windowsill.

I think we all feel like this now and then.

I'd even like to visit Andernach, Germany, the place where I began. then I'd like to fly on to Moscow to check out their mass transit system so I'd have something faintly lewd to whisper into the ear of the mayor of Los Angeles upon my return to this fucking place.

it could happen.

I'm ready.

I've watched snails climb over ten foot walls and vanish.

you mustn't confuse this with ambition.

I would be able to laugh at my good turn of the cards—

and I won't forget you.

I'll send postcards and snapshots, and the finished sonnet.

12:18 a.m.

beheaded in the middle of the night scratching my sides I am covered with bites kick my white legs out of the sheets as the sirens scream there is a gun blast.
I go to the kitchen for a glass of water destroy the reverie of a roach destroy the roach.
a gale comes from the North as the man in the apartment across from me inserts his penis into the rump of his 4 year old daughter.
I hear the screams light a cigar stick it into the lips of my beheaded head.
it is half a cigar stale a *Medalist Naturáles*, No. 7.
I walk back to the bedroom with a spray can.
I press the button.
it hisses. I gag, think of ancient wars loves dead.
so much happens in the dark yet tomorrow the sun will move up and on, you'll get a ticket if you park on the south side of the street on Thursday or the north side on Friday.
the efficiency of the sun and the law bulwarks sanity.
something bites me.
I madden
spray half my bedsheets.
I turn
see the dark mirror— the cigar the loose belly me old.
I laugh.
it's good they don't know.
I take my head
put it back on my neck
get between the sheets and
can't sleep.

yellow cab

the Mexican dancer shook her fans at me and her ass at me, I didn't ask her to and

my woman got mad and ran out of the cafe and it began raining and you could hear it on the roof and I didn't have a job and I had 13 days left on the rent.

sometimes when a woman runs out on you like that you wonder if it's not economics, you can't blame them— if I had to get fucked I'd rather get fucked by somebody with money.

we're all scared but when you're ugly and you don't have much left you get strong, and I called the waiter over and I said, I think I am going to turn this table over, I'm bored, I'm insane, I need action, call in your goon, I'll piss on his collarbone.

I got

thrown out swiftly. it was raining. I picked myself up in the rain and walked down the empty street cotton candy sweet dumb shit for sale, all the little stores locked with 67¢ Woolworth locks.

I reached the end of the street in time to see her get into the yellow cab with another guy.

I fell down by a garbage can, stood up and pissed against it, feeling sad and not sad, knowing there was only so much they could do to

you, piss sliding down the corrugated tin, the philosophers must have had something to say about this. women. their luck against your destiny. winner take Barcelona. next bar.

how come you're not unlisted?

the men phone and ask me that.
are you really Charles Bukowski the writer? they ask.
I'm a sometimes writer, I say, most often I don't do anything.
listen, they ask, I like your stuff—do you mind if I come over and bring a couple of 6
packs?
you can bring them, I say if *you* don't come in…
when the women phone, I say, o yes, I *write*, I'm a writer only I'm not writing right now.
I feel foolish phoning you, they say, and I was surprised to find you listed in the phone book.
I have reasons, I say, by the way why don't you come over for a beer?
you wouldn't mind?
and they arrive
handsome women
good of mind and body and eye.
often there isn't sex but I'm used to that yet it's good
very good just to look at them— and some rare times I have unexpected good luck otherwise.
for a man of 55 who didn't get laid until he was 23
and not very often until he was 50
I think that I should stay listed via Pacific Telephone until I get as much as the average man has had.
of course, I'll have to keep writing immortal poems but the inspiration is there.

weather report

I suppose it’s raining in some Spanish town now while I’m feeling bad like this; I’d like to think so now.
let’s go to a Mexican hamlet— that sounds nice: a Mexican hamlet while I’m feeling bad like this the walls yellow with age— that rain out there,
a pig moving in his pen at night disturbed by the rain, little eyes like cigarette-ends, and his damned tail: see it?
I can’t imagine the people.
it’s hard for me to imagine the people.
maybe they are feeling bad like this, almost as bad as this.
I wonder what they do when they feel bad?
they probably don’t mention it.
they say,
“look, it’s raining.”
that’s the best way.

clean old man

here I’ll be 55 in a week.
what will I write about when it no longer stands up in the morning?
my critics will love it when my playground narrows down to tortoises and shellstars.
they might even say nice things about me
as if I had finally come to my senses.

something

I’m out of matches.
the springs in my couch
are broken.
they stole my footlocker.
they stole my oil painting of
two pink eyes.
my car broke down.
eels climb my bathroom walls.
my love is broken.
but the stockmarket went up
today.

a plate glass window

dogs and angels are not very different.

I often go to this place to eat about 2:30 in the afternoon because all the people who eat there are particularly addled simply glad to be alive and eating baked beans near a plate glass window which holds the heat and doesn’t let the cars and sidewalks inside.

we are allowed as much free coffee as we can drink and we sit and quietly drink the black strong coffee.

it is good to be sitting someplace in a world at 2:30 in the afternoon without having the flesh ripped from your bones. even being addled, we know this.

nobody bothers us we bother nobody.

angels and dogs are not very different at 2:30 in the afternoon.

I have my favorite table and after I have finished I stack the plates, saucers,

the cup, the silverware neatly— my offering to the luck— and that sun working good all up and down

inside the darkness

here.

junkies

“she shoots up in the neck,” she told me. I told her to stick it into my ass and she tried and said, “oh oh,”

and I said, “what the hell’s the matter?”

she said, “nothing, this is New York style,” and she jammed it in again and said, “oh shit.” I took it and put it into my arm, I got part of it.

“I don’t know why people

fuck with the stuff, there’s not that much to it. I think they’re all losers and they want to lose real bad. there’s no other way, it’s like they can’t get where they’re going or want to go and there’s no other way.

this has got to be it.

she shoots up in the neck.”

“I know,” I said. “I phoned her, she could hardly talk, said it was laryngitis. have some of this wine.”

it was white wine and 4:30 a.m. and her daughter was sleeping in the bedroom. she had cable tv with no sound and a large screen young John Wayne watched us, and we neither kissed nor made love and I left at 6:15 a.m.

after the beer and wine were gone so her daughter wouldn’t awaken for school and find me sitting in bed with her mother

with John Wayne and the night gone and not much chance for anybody—

99 to one

the blazing shark
wants my balls
as I walk through the meat section looking for salami and cheese
purple housewives
fingering 75 cent avocados know my shopping cart is an oversized cock
I am a man with a switchball watch standing in a honky-tonk phonebooth sucking strawberry red titty upsidedown in a Philadelphia crowd.
suddenly all about me are screams of RAPE RAPE RAPE RAPE RAPE
and I am stiffing it to something beneath me dyed red hair, bad breath, blue teeth
I used to like Monet
I used to like Monet very much it was funny, I thought, the way he did it with colors
women are so expensive dog leashes are expensive I am going to start selling air in dark orange bags marked: moon-blooms
I used to like bottles full of blood young girls in camel-hair coats Prince Valiant Popeye's magic touch
the struggle is in the struggle like a corkscrew
a good man doesn't get cork in the wine
the thought has occurred to millions of men while shaving the removal of life might be preferred to the removal of hair
spit out cotton and clean your rearview mirror, run like you mean it, drunk jock, the whores will win, the fools will win, but break like a horse out of the gate.

the crunch

too much
too little
too fat
too thin
or nobody.
laughter or
tears
haters
lovers
strangers with faces like the backs of thumb tacks
armies running through streets of blood waving winebottles bayoneting and fucking virgins.
or an old guy in a cheap room with a photograph of M. Monroe.
there is a loneliness in this world so great that you can see it in the slow movement of the hands of a clock.
people so tired mutilated either by love or no love.
people just are not good to each other one on one.
the rich are not good to the rich the poor are not good to the poor.
we are afraid.
our educational system tells us that we can all be big-ass winners.
it hasn’t told us about the gutters or the suicides.
or the terror of one person aching in one place alone
untouched
unspoken to
watering a plant.
people are not good to each other.
people are not good to each other.
people are not good to each other.
I suppose they never will be.
I don’t ask them to be.
but sometimes I think about it.

the beads will swing the clouds will cloud and the killer will behead the child like taking a bite out of an ice cream cone.
too much
too little
too fat
too thin
or nobody
more haters than lovers.
people are not good to each other.
perhaps if they were our deaths would not be so sad.
meanwhile I look at young girls stems flowers of chance.
there must be a way.
surely there must be a way we have not yet thought of.
who put this brain inside of me?
it cries
it demands
it says that there is a chance.
it will not say “no.”

a horse with greenblue eyes

what you see is what you see: madhouses are rarely on display.
that we still walk about and scratch ourselves and light cigarettes
is more the miracle than bathing beauties
than roses and the moth.
to sit in a small room and drink a can of beer and roll a cigarette while listening to Brahms on a small red radio
is to have come back from a dozen wars alive
listening to the sound of the refrigerator
as bathing beauties rot
and the oranges and apples roll away.

3

Scarlet

Scarlet

I’m glad when they arrive and I’m glad when they leave
I’m glad when I hear their heels approaching my door and I’m glad when those heels walk away
I’m glad to fuck I’m glad to care and I’m glad when it’s over
and
since it’s always either starting or finishing I’m glad most of the time
and the cats walk up and down and the earth spins around the sun and the phone rings:
“this is Scarlet.”
“who?”
“Scarlet.”
“o.k., get it on over.”
and I hang up thinking maybe this is it
go in
take a quick shit shave
bathe
dress
dump the sacks and cartons of empty bottles
sit down to the sound of heels approaching more an army approaching than victory
it’s Scarlet
and in my kitchen the faucet keeps dripping needs a washer.
I’ll take care of it later.

red up and down

red hair
real
she whirled it and she asked “is my ass still on?”
such comedy.
there is always one woman to save you from another
and as that woman saves you she makes ready to destroy.
“sometimes I hate you,”
she said.
she walked out and sat on my porch and read my copy of Catullus, she stayed out there for an hour.
people walked up and down past my place wondering where such an ugly old man could get such beauty.
I didn’t know either.
when she walked in I grabbed her and pulled her to my lap.
I lifted my glass and told her, “drink this.”
“oh,” she said, “you’ve mixed wine with Jim Beam, you’re gonna get nasty.”
“you henna your hair, don’t you?”
“you don’t *look*,” she said and stood up and pulled down her slacks and panties and the hair down there was the same as the hair up there.
Catullus himself couldn’t have wished for more historic or wondrous grace; then he went goofy
for tender boys not mad enough to become women.

like a flower in the rain

I cut the middle fingernail of the middle finger right hand
real short
and I began rubbing along her cunt as she sat upright in bed spreading lotion over her arms face and breasts
after bathing.
then she lit a cigarette: “don’t let this put you off,”
and smoked and continued to rub the lotion on.
I continued to rub the cunt.
“you want an apple?” I asked.
“sure,” she said, “you got one?”
but I got to her— she began to twist then she rolled on her side, she was getting wet and open like a flower in the rain.
then she rolled on her stomach and her most beautiful ass looked up at me and I reached under and got the cunt again.
she reached around and got my cock, she rolled and twisted, I mounted my face falling into the mass of red hair that overflowed from her head and my fattened cock entered into the miracle.
later we joked about the lotion and the cigarette and the apple.
then I went out and got some chicken and shrimp and french fries and buns and mashed potatoes and gravy and cole slaw, and we ate. she told me how good she felt and I told her how good I felt and we ate the chicken and the shrimp and the french fries and the buns and the mashed potatoes and the gravy and the cole slaw too.

light brown

light brown stare
that dumb blank marvelous light brown stare
I’ll take care of it.
you needn’t carry me anymore with your Cleopatra movie star tricks
do you realize that if I were an adding machine I might break down tabulating how many times you’ve used that light brown stare?
not that you’re not the best with your light brown stare.
someday some crazy son of a bitch is going to murder you
and you’ll cry out my name you’ll finally know what you should have known
so very long ago.

huge ear rings

I go to pick her up.
she’s on some errand.
she always has errands many things to do.
I have nothing to do.
she comes out of her apartment I see her move toward my car
she is barefooted
dressed casually
except for huge ear rings.
I light a cigarette and when I look up she is stretched out on the street
a quite busy street
all 112 pounds of her as beautiful as anything you might imagine.
I switch on the radio and wait for her to get up.
she does.
I flip the car door open.
she gets in. I drive away from the curb. she likes the song on the radio she turns the radio up.
she seems to like all the songs she seems to know all the songs
each time I see her she looks better and better
200 years ago they would have burned her at the stake
now she puts on her mascara as we drive along.

she came out of the bathroom with her flaming red hair and said—

the cops want me to come down and identify some guy who tried to rape me.
I’ve lost the key to my car again; I’ve got the key to open the door but not the one to start it.
those people are trying to take my child away from me but I won’t let them.
Rochelle almost o.d.’d, then she went at Harry with something, and he punched her.
she’s had those cracked ribs, you know, and one of them punctured her lung. she’s down at the county under a machine.
where’s my comb?
your comb has all that guck in it.
I told her,
I haven’t seen your comb.

a killer

consistency is terrific: shark-mouth grubby interior with an almost perfect body, long blazing hair— it confuses me and others
she runs from man to man offering endearments
she speaks of love
then breaks each man to her will
shark-mouthed
grubby interior
we see it too late: after the cock gets swallowed the heart follows
her long blazing hair, her almost perfect body walks down the street as the same sun falls upon flowers.

longshot

she’s not for you, man, she’s not your type, she’s erased she’s been used she’s got all the wrong habits, he told me
in between races.
I’m going to bet the 4
horse, I told him.
well, it’s only that I’d like to turn her around in mid-stream, save her, you might say.
you can’t save her, he said, you’re 55, you need kindness.
I’m going to bet the 6 horse.
you’re not the one to save her.
who can save her? I asked.
I don’t think the 6 has a chance, I like the 4.
she needs somebody to beat her from wall to wall, he said, kick her ass, she’d love it. She’d stay home and wash the dishes.
the 6 horse will be in the running.
I’m no good at beating women, I said.
forget her then, he said.
it’s hard to, I said.
he got up and bet the 6
and I got up and bet the 4.
the 5 horse won by 3 lengths at 15 to one.
she’s got red hair like lightning from heaven, I said.
forget her, he said.
we tore up our tickets and stared at the lake in the center of the track.
it was going to be a long afternoon for both of us.

the promise

she bent over the side of the bed and opened the portfolio along the side of the wall.

we were drinking.

she said, “you promised me these paintings once, don’t you remember?”

“what? no, no, I don’t remember.”

“well, you did,” she said, “and you ought to keep your promises.”

“leave those fucking paintings alone,”

I said.

then I walked into the kitchen for a beer. I paused to vomit and when I came out I saw her through my window going down the court walk toward her place in back.

she was trying to hurry and balanced on top of her head were 40 paintings: oils black and whites

acrylics

water colors.

she stumbled once and almost fell on her ass.

then she ran up her steps and was gone through her door to her place upstairs running with all those paintings on top of her head.

it was one of the funniest damned things I ever did see.

well, I guess I’ll just have to paint 40 more.

waving and waving goodbye

I paid this one’s fare all the way from Houston to San Francisco then flew up to meet her at her brother’s house and I got drunk and talked all night about a redhead, and she finally said, “you sleep up there,”

and I climbed the ladder up into a bunk and she slept down there.

the next day they drove me to the airport and I flew back, thinking, well, there’s still the redhead and when I got back in I phoned the redhead and said, “I’m back, baby, I flew up to see this woman and I talked about you all night, so here I am…”

“well, why don’t you fly back up and finish the job?” she said and hung up.

then I got drunk and the phone rang and they said they were two ladies from Germany and they’d like to see me.

so they came over and one was 20 and the other was 22. I told them that my heart had been smashed for the last time and that I was giving up women. they laughed at me and we drank and smoked and went to bed together.

I got this thing in front of me and first I grabbed one and then I grabbed the other.

I finally settled on the 22 year old and ate her up.

they stayed 2 days and 2 nights but I never got to the 20 year old, she was on tampax.

I finally drove them to Sherman Oaks and they stood at the foot of a long driveway waving and waving goodbye as I backed my Volks out.

when I got back there was a letter from a lady in Eureka. she said that she wanted me to fuck her until she couldn’t walk anymore.

I stretched out and whacked-off thinking about a little girl I had seen on a red bicycle about a week ago.

then I took a bath and put on my green terrycloth robe just in time to get the fights on tv from the Olympic.

there was a black and a Chicano in there.

that always made a good fight.

and it was a good idea too: put them in there and let them kill each other.
I watched the whole fight thinking about the redhead all the time.
I think the Chicano won but I’m not sure.

liberty

she was sitting in the window of room 1010 at the Chelsea in New York, Janis Joplin’s old room.

it was 104 degrees and she was on speed and had one leg over the sill, and she leaned out and said, “God, this is great!”

and then she slipped and almost went out, just catching herself.

it was very close.

she pulled herself in walked over and stretched on the bed.

I’ve lost a lot of women in a lot of different ways but that would have been the first time that way.

then she rolled off the bed landed on her back and when I walked over she was asleep.

all day she had been wanting to see the Statue of Liberty.

now she wouldn’t worry me about that for a while.

don’t touch the girls

she’s up seeing my doctor trying to get some diet pills; she’s not fat, she needs the speed.

I go down to the nearest bar and wait.

at 3:30 in the afternoon of a tuesday.

they have a dancer.

there’s only one other man in the bar.

she works out

looking at herself in the mirror.

she’s like a monkey dark Korean.

she’s not very good, skinny and obvious and she sticks her tongue out at me then at the other man.

times must be truly hard, I think.

I have a few more beers then get up to leave.

she waves me over.

“you go?” she asks.

“yes,” I say, “my wife has cancer.”

I shake her hand.

she points to a sign behind her: DON’T TOUCH THE GIRLS.

she points to the sign and says, “the sign says, ‘DON’T TOUCH THE GIRLS’.”

I go back to the parking lot and wait.

she comes out.

“did you get the pills?” I ask.

“yes,” she says.

“then it’s been a successful day.”

I think of the dancer walking across my kitchen. I can’t visualize it. I am going to die alone just the way I live.

“take me to my place,” she says, “I’ve got to get ready for night school.”

“sure,” I say and drive her on in.

dark shades

I never wear dark shades but this red head went to get a prescription filled on Hollywood Blvd.
and she kept haggling and working at me, snapping and snarling.
I left her at the prescription counter and walked around and got a large tube of Crest and a giant bottle of Joy.
then I walked up to
the dark shade display rack and bought the most vicious pair of shades I could find.
we paid for our things walked down to a Mexican place and she ordered a taco she couldn’t eat and sat there haggling and snapping and snarling at me and after eating I ordered 3 beers drank them down then put on my shades.
“o my God,” she said, “o my God shit!”
and I ripped her up both sides most excellent riposte snarling stinking marmalade shots shit blows farts from hell,
then I got up
paid
she following me out both of us in shades and the sidewalks split.
we found her car
got in and drove off
me sitting there
pushing the shades back against my nose
ripping out her backbone and waving it out the window like a broken Confederate flagpole…
dark and vicious shades help.
“o my God shit!” she said, and the sun was up
and I didn’t know it.
they were a bargain for $4.25
even though I had left the Crest and the Joy behind at the taco place.

prayer in bad weather

by God, I don’t know what to do.
they’re so nice to have around.
they have a way of playing with the balls and looking at the cock very seriously turning it
tweeking it
examining each part as their long hair falls on your belly.
it’s not the fucking and sucking alone that reaches into a man and softens him, it’s the extras, it’s all the extras.
now it’s raining tonight and there’s nobody they are elsewhere examining things in new bedrooms in new moods or maybe in old
bedrooms.
anyhow, it’s raining tonight, one hell of a dashing, pouring rain….
very little to do.
I’ve read the newspaper paid the gas bill the electric co.
the phone bill.
it keeps raining.
they soften a man and then let him swim in his own juice.
I need an old-fashioned whore at the door tonight closing her green umbrella, drops of moonlit rain on her purse, saying, “shit, man, can’t you get better music than *that* on your radio?
and turn up the heat…”
it’s always when a man’s swollen with love and everything else that it keeps raining splattering flooding
rain
good for the trees and the grass and the air…
good for things that live alone.
I would give anything for a female’s hand on me tonight.
they soften a man and then leave him listening to the rain.

melancholia

the history of melancholia includes all of us.
me, I writhe in dirty sheets while staring at blue walls and nothing.
I have gotten so used to melancholia that I greet it like an old friend.
I will now do 15 minutes of grieving for the lost redhead, I tell the gods.
I do it and feel quite bad quite sad, then I rise
CLEANSED
even though nothing is solved.
that's what I get for kicking religion in the ass.
I should have kicked the redhead in the ass where her brains and her bread and butter are at…
but, no, I've felt sad about everything:
the lost redhead was just another smash in a lifelong loss…
I listen to drums on the radio now and grin.
there is something wrong with me besides melancholia.

a stethoscope case

my doctor has just come into his office from surgery.

he meets me in the men’s john.

“God damn,” he says to me, “where did you find her? oh, I just like to *look* at girls like that!”

I tell him: “it’s my specialty: cement hearts and beautiful bodies. If you can find a heart-beat, let me know.”

“I’ll take good care of her,” he says.

“yes, and please remember all the ethical codes of your honorable profession,” I tell him.

he zips up first then washes.

“how’s your health?” he asks.

“physically I’m sound as a tic. mentally I’m wasted, doomed, on my tiny cross, all that crap.”

“I’ll take good care of her.”

“yes. and let me know about the heart-beat.”

he walks out.

I finish, zip up and also walk out.

only I don’t wash up.

I’m far beyond all that.

eat your heart out

I’ve come by, she says, to tell you that this is it. I’m not kidding, it’s over. this is it.

I sit on the couch watching her arrange her long red hair before my bedroom mirror.

she pulls her hair up and piles it on top of her head— she lets her eyes look at my eyes— then she drops the hair and lets it fall down in front of her face.

we go to bed and I hold her speechlessly from the back my arm around her neck I touch her wrists and hands feel up to her elbows

no further.

she gets up.

this is it, she says, eat your heart out. You got any rubber bands?

I don’t know.

here’s one, she says, this will do. well, I’m going.

I get up and walk her to the door

just as she leaves she says, I want you to buy me some high-heeled shoes with tall thin spikes, black high-heeled shoes.

no, I want them red.

I watch her walk down the cement walk under the trees she walks all right and as the poinsettas drip in the sun I close the door.

the retreat

this time has finished me.
I feel like the German troops whipped by snow and the communists walking bent with newspapers stuffed into worn boots.
my plight is just as terrible.
maybe more so.
victory was so close victory was there.
as she stood before my mirror younger and more beautiful than any woman I had ever known combing yards and yards of red hair as I watched her.
and when she came to bed she was more beautiful than ever and the love was very very good.
eleven months.
now she’s gone
gone as they go.
this time has finished me.
it’s a long road back
and back to where?
the guy ahead of me falls.
I step over him.
did she get him too?

I made a mistake

I reached up into the top of the closet and took out a pair of blue panties and showed them to her and asked “are these yours?”
and she looked and said,
“no, those belong to a dog.”
she left after that and I haven’t seen her since. she’s not at her place.
I keep going there, leaving notes stuck into the door. I go back and the notes are still there. I take the Maltese cross cut it down from my car mirror, tie it to her doorknob with a shoelace, leave a book of poems.
when I go back the next night everything is still there.
I keep searching the streets for that blood-wine battleship she drives with a weak battery, and the doors hanging from broken hinges.
I drive around the streets an inch away from weeping, ashamed of my sentimentality and possible love.
a confused old man driving in the rain wondering where the good luck went.

girls in pantyhose

schoolgirls in pantyhose sitting on bus stop benches looking tired at 13
with their raspberry lipstick.
it’s hot in the sun and the day at school has been dull, and going home is dull, and I drive by in my car peering at their warm legs.
their eyes look
away—
they’ve been warned about ruthless and horny old studs; they’re just not going to give it away like that.
and yet it’s dull waiting out the minutes on the bench and the years at home, and the books they carry are dull and the food they eat is dull, and even the ruthless, horny old studs are dull.
the girls in pantyhose wait, they await the proper time and moment, and then they will move and then they will conquer.
I drive around in my car peeking up their legs pleased that I will never be part of their heaven and their hell. but that scarlet
lipstick on those sad waiting mouths! it would be nice to kiss each of them once, fully, then give them back.
but the bus will get them first.

4

popular melodies in the last of your mind

up your yellow river

a woman told a man when he got off a plane that I was dead.

a magazine printed the fact that I was dead and somebody else said that they'd heard that I was dead, and then somebody wrote an article and said our Rimbaud our Villon is dead. at the same time an old drinking buddy published a piece stating that I could no longer write. a real Judas job. they can't wait for me to go, these farts. well, I'm listening to Tchaikovsky's piano concerto number one and the announcer said Mahler's 5th and 10th symphonies are coming up via

Amsterdam,

and the beerbottles are on the floor and ash from my cigarettes covers my cotton underwear and my gut, I've

told all my girlfriends to go to hell, and even this is a better poem than any of those gravediggers could write.

artists:

she wrote me for years.

"I'm drinking wine in the kitchen.

it's raining outside. the children are in school."

she was an average citizen worried about her soul, her typewriter and her underground poetry reputation.

she wrote fairly well and with honesty but only long after others had broken the road ahead.

she'd phone me drunk at 2 a.m.

at 3 a.m.

while her husband slept.

"it's good to hear your voice," she'd say.

"it's good to hear your voice too," I'd say.

what the hell, you know.

she finally came down. I think it had something to do with *The Chapparal Poets Society of California.*

they had to elect officers. she phoned me from their hotel.

"I'm here," she said, "we're going to elect officers."

"o.k., fine," I said, "get some good ones."

I hung up.

the phone rang again.

"hey, don't you want to see me?"

"sure," I said, "what's the address?"

after she said goodbye I jacked-off changed my stockings drank a half bottle of wine and drove on out.

they were all drunk and trying to fuck each other.

I drove her back to my place.

she had on pink panties with ribbons.

we drank some beer and smoked and talked about Ezra Pound, then we slept.

it's no longer clear to me whether I drove her to the airport or not.

she still writes letters and I answer each one viciously hoping to make her stop.

someday she may luck into fame like Erica

Jong. (her face is not as good but her body is better) and I'll think, my God, what have I done?

I blew it.

or rather: I didn't blow it.

meanwhile I have her box number and I'd better inform her that my second novel will be out in September.

that ought to keep her nipples hard while I consider the possibility of Francine du Plessix Gray.

I have shit stains in my underwear too

I hear them outside: “does he always type this late?”
“no, it’s very unusual.”
“he shouldn’t type this late.”
“he hardly ever does.”
“does he drink?”
“I think he does.”
“he went to the mailbox in his underwear yesterday.”
“I saw him too.”
“he doesn’t have any friends.”
“he’s old.”
“he shouldn’t type this late.”
they go inside and it begins to rain as 3 gun shots sound half a block away and one of the skyscrapers in downtown L.A. begins burning 25 foot flames licking toward doom.

Hawley's leaving town

this guy

he's got a crazy eye and he's brown a dark brown from the sun the Hollywood and Western sun the racetrack sun he sees me and he says, "hey, Hawley's leaving town for a week. he messes up my handicapping. now I've got a chance."

he's grinning, he means it: with Hawley out of town he's going to move toward that castle in the Hollywood Hills; dancing girls six German Shepherds a drawbridge, ten year old

wine.

Sam the Whorehouse Man walks up and I tell Sam that I am clearing $150 a day at the track.

"I work right off the toteboard," I tell him.

"I need a girl," he tells me, "who can belt-buckle a guy without coming out with all this Christian moral bullshit afterwards."

"Hawley's leaving town,"

I tell Sam.

"where's the Shoe?"

he asks.

"back east," says an old man who's standing there.

he has a white plastic shield over his left eye with little holes punched into it.

"that leaves it all to Pinky,"

says dark brown.

we all stand looking at each other.

then

a silent signal given we turn away and start walking, each in a different direction: north south east west.

we know something.

an unkind poem

they go on writing
pumping out poems—
young boys and college professors wives who drink wine all afternoon while their husbands work, they go on writing the same names in the same magazines everybody writing a little worse each year, getting out a poetry collection and pumping out more poems it's like a contest it is a contest
but the prize is invisible.
they won't write short stories or articles or novels they just go on
pumping out poems
each sounding more and more like the others and less and less like themselves, and some of the young boys weary and quit but the professors never quit and the wives who drink wine in the afternoons never ever ever quit and new young boys arrive with new magazines and there is some correspondence with lady or men poets and some fucking and everything is exaggerated and dull.
when the poems come back they retype them and send them off to the next magazine on the list, and they give *readings* all the readings they can for free most of the time
hoping that somebody will finally know finally applaud them finally congratulate and recognize their talent they are all so sure of their genius there is so little self-doubt, and most of them live in North Beach or New York City, and their faces are like their poems: alike, and they know each other and gather and hate and admire and choose and discard and keep pumping out more poems more poems more poems
the contest of the dullards: tap tap tap, tap tap, tap tap tap, tap tap…

the bee

I suppose like any other boy I had one best friend in the neighborhood.
his name was Eugene and he was bigger than I was and one year older.
Eugene used to whip me pretty good.
we fought all the time.
I kept trying him but without much success.
once we leaped off a garage roof together to prove our guts.
I twisted my ankle and he came up clean as freshly-wrapped butter.
I guess the only good thing he ever did for me was when the bee stung me while I was barefoot and while I sat down and pulled the stinger out he said, “I’ll get the son of a bitch!”
and he did
with a tennis racket plus a rubber hammer.
it was all right
they say they die
anyway.
my foot swelled up double-size and I stayed in bed praying for death
and Eugene went on to become an Admiral or a Commander or something large in the United States Navy
and he passed through one or two wars without injury.
I imagine him an old man now in a rocking chair with his false teeth and glass of buttermilk…
while drunk
I fingerfuck this 19 year old groupie in bed with me.
but the worst part is (like jumping off the garage roof) Eugene wins again because he’s not even thinking about me.

the most

here comes the fishhead singing here comes the baked potato in drag
here comes nothing to do all day long here comes another night of no sleep
here comes the phone ringing the wrong tone
here comes a termite with a banjo here comes a flagpole with blank eyes here comes a cat and a dog wearing nylons
here comes a machinegun singing here comes bacon burning in the pan here comes a voice saying something dull
here comes a newspaper stuffed with small red birds with flat brown beaks
here comes a cunt carrying a torch a grenade a deathly love
here comes victory carrying one bucket of blood and stumbling over the berrybush
and the sheets hang out the windows
and the bombers head east west north south get lost get tossed like salad
as all the fish in the sea line up and form one line
one long line
one very long thin line
the longest line you could ever imagine
and we get lost
walking past purple mountains
we walk lost
bare at last like the knife
having given
having spit it out like an unexpected olive seed
as the girl at the call service screams over the phone: “don’t call back! you sound like a jerk!”

ah…

drinking German beer and trying to come up with the immortal poem at 5 p.m. in the afternoon.
but, ah, I’ve told the students that the thing to do is not to try.
but when the women aren’t around and the horses aren’t running what else is there to do?
I’ve had a couple of sexual fantasies had lunch out mailed three letters been to the grocery store.
nothing on tv.
the telephone is quiet.
I’ve run dental floss between my teeth.
it won’t rain and I listen to the early arrivals from the 8 hour day as they drive in and park their cars behind the apartment next door.
I sit drinking German beer and trying to come up with the big one and I’m not going to make it.
I’m just going to keep drinking
more and more German beer and rolling smokes and by 11 p.m.
I’ll be spread out on the unmade bed face up asleep under the electric light
still waiting on the immortal poem.

the girl on the bus stop bench

I saw her when I was in the left lane going east on Sunset.
she was sitting with her legs crossed reading a paperback.
she was Italian or Indian or Greek and I was stopped at a red signal as now and then a wind would lift her skirt, I was directly across from her looking in, and such perfect immaculate legs I had never seen.
I am essentially bashful but I stared and kept staring until the person in the car behind me honked.
it had never happened quite like that before.
I drove around the block and parked in the supermarket lot directly across from her in my dark shades I kept staring like a schoolboy in his first excitement.
I memorized her shoes her dress her stockings
her face.
cars came by and blocked my view.
then I saw her again.
the wind flipped her skirt high along her thighs and I began rubbing myself.
just before her bus came I climaxed.
I smelled my sperm felt it wet against my shorts and pants.
it was an ugly white bus and it took her away.
I backed out of the parking lot thinking, I'm a peep-freak but at least I didn't expose myself.
I'm a peep-freak but why do they do that?
why do they look like that?
why do they let the wind do that?
when I got home I undressed and bathed got out toweled
turned on
the news
turned off the news and
wrote this poem.

I’m getting back to where I was

I used to take the back off the telephone and stuff it with rags and when somebody knocked I wouldn’t answer and if they persisted I’d tell them in terms vulgar to vanish.

just another old crank with wings of gold flabby white belly plus eyes to knock out the sun.

a lovely couple

I had to take a shit but instead I went into this shop to have a key made.
the woman was dressed in gingham and smelled like a muskrat.
“Ralph,” she hollered and an old swine in a flowered shirt and size 6 shoes, her husband, came out and she said, “this man wants a key.”
he started grinding as if he really didn’t want to.
there were slinking shadows and urine in the air.
I moved along the glass counter, pointed and called to her, “here, I want this one.”
she handed it to me: a switchblade in a light purple case.
$6.50 plus tax.
the key cost practically nothing.
I got my change and
walked out on the street.
sometimes you need people like that.

the strangest sight you ever did see—

I had this room in front on DeLongpre and I used to sit for hours in the daytime looking out the front window.
there were any number of girls who would walk by swaying;
it helped my afternoons, added something to the beer and the cigarettes.
one day I saw something extra.
I heard the sound of it first.
“come on, push!” he said.
there was a long board about 2½ feet wide and 8 feet long; nailed to the ends and in the middle were roller skates.
he was pulling in front two long ropes attached to the board and she was in back guiding and also pushing.
all their possessions were tied to the board: pots, pans, bedquilts, and so forth were roped to the board tied down; and the skatewheels were grinding.
he was white, red-necked, a southerner—
thin, slumped, his pants about to fall from his ass— his face pinked by the sun and cheap wine, and she was black and walked upright pushing; she was simply beautiful in turban long green ear rings yellow dress from
neck to
ankle.
her face was gloriously indifferent.
“don’t worry!” he shouted, looking back at her, “somebody will rent us a place!”
she didn’t answer.
then they were gone although I still heard the skatewheels.
they’re going to make it, I thought.
I’m sure they
did.

in a neighborhood of murder

the roaches spit out paperclips and the helicopter circles and circles smelling for blood searchlights leering down into our bedroom

5 guys in this court have pistols another a machete we are all murderers and alcoholics but there are worse in the hotel across the street they sit in the green and white doorway banal and depraved waiting to be institutionalized

here we each have a small green plant in the window and when we fight with our women at 3 a.m.

we speak softly and on each porch is a small dish of food always eaten by morning we presume by the cats.

private first class

they took my man off the street the other day he wore an L.A. Rams sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off and under that an army shirt private first class and he wore a green beret walked very straight he was black in brown walking shorts hair dyed blonde he never bothered anybody he stole a few babies and ran off cackling but he always returned the infants unharmed he slept in the back of the Love Parlor the girls let him.

compassion is found in strange places.

one day I didn't see him then another.

I asked around.

my taxes are going to go up again. the state's got to house and feed him. the cops took him in. no good.

love is a dog from hell

feet of cheese
coffeepot soul
hands that hate poolsticks eyes like paperclips I prefer red wine I am bored on airliners I am docile during earthquakes I am sleepy at funerals I puke at parades and am sacrificial at chess and cunt and caring I smell urine in churches I can no longer read I can no longer sleep
eyes like paperclips my green eyes I prefer white wine
my box of rubbers is getting stale I take them out
Trojan-Enz
lubricated
for greater sensitivity I take them out and put three of them on
the walls of my bedroom are blue
Linda where did you go?
Katherine where did you go?
(and Nina went to England)
I have toenail clippers and Windex glass cleaner
green eyes
blue bedroom
bright machinegun sun
this whole thing is like a seal caught on oily rocks and circled by the Long Beach Marching Band at 3:36 p.m.
there is a ticking behind me but no clock I feel something crawling along the left side of my nose: memories of airliners
my mother had false teeth my father had false teeth and every Saturday of their lives they took up all the rugs in their house waxed the hardwood floors
and covered them with rugs again and Nina is in England and Irene is on ATD
and I take my green eyes and lay down in my blue bedroom.

my groupie

I read last Saturday in the redwoods outside of Santa Cruz and I was about 3/4’s finished when I heard a long high scream and a quite attractive young girl came running toward me long gown & divine eyes of fire and she leaped up on the stage and screamed: “I WANT YOU!

I WANT YOU! TAKE ME! TAKE
ME!”

I told her, “look, get the hell away from me.”

but she kept tearing at my clothing and throwing herself at me.

“where were you,” I asked her, “when I was living on one candy bar a day and sending short stories to the Atlantic Monthly?”

she grabbed my balls and almost twisted them off. her kisses tasted like shitsoup.

2 women jumped up on the stage and carried her off into the woods.

I could still hear her screams as I began the next poem.

maybe, I thought, I should have taken her on the stage in front of all those eyes.

but one can never be sure whether it’s good poetry or bad acid.

now, if you were teaching creative writing, he asked, what would you tell them?

I’d tell them to have an unhappy love affair, hemorrhoids, bad teeth and to drink cheap wine, avoid opera and golf and chess, to keep switching the head of their bed from wall to wall and then I’d tell them to have another unhappy love affair and never to use a silk typewriter ribbon, avoid family picnics or being photographed in a rose garden; read Hemingway only once, skip Faulkner ignore Gogol
stare at photos of Gertrude Stein and read Sherwood Anderson in bed while eating Ritz crackers, realize that people who keep talking about sexual liberation are more frightened than you are.
listen to E. Power Biggs work the organ on your radio while you’re rolling Bull Durham in the dark in a strange town with one day left on the rent after having given up friends, relatives and jobs.
never consider yourself superior and/
or fair
and never try to be.
have another unhappy love affair.
watch a fly on a summer curtain.
never try to succeed.
don’t shoot pool.
be righteously angry when you find your car has a flat tire.
take vitamins but don’t lift weights or jog.
then after all this
reverse the procedure.
have a good love affair.
and the thing
you might learn
is that nobody knows anything— not the State, nor the mice the garden hose or the North Star.

and if you ever catch me teaching a creative writing class and you read this back to me I’ll give you a straight A right up the pickle barrel.

the good life

a house with 7 or 8 people living in it getting up the rent.

there's a stereo never used and a set of bongos never used and there are rugs over the windows and you smoke

as the living roaches stumble over buttons on your shirt and tumble off.

it's dark and somebody sends out for food. you eat the food and sleep. everybody sleeps at once: on floors, coffeetables, couches, beds, in bathtubs. there's even one in the brush outside.

then somebody wakes up and says, "come on, let's roll one!"

a few others wake up.

"sure. yea. o.k."

"all right. come on, somebody roll a couple. let's get it on!"

"yeah! Let's get it on!"

we smoke a few joints and then we're asleep again

except we reverse positions: bathtub to couch, coffeetable to rug, bed to floor, and a new one falls into the brush outside, and they haven't yet found Patty Hearst and Tim doesn't want to speak to Allan.

the Greek

the guy in the front court can’t speak English, he’s Greek, a rather stupid-looking and fairly ugly man.
now my landlord does some painting, it’s not very good.
he showed the Greek one of his paintings.
the Greek went out and purchased paper, brushes, paints.
the Greek started painting in his front court. he leaves the paintings outside to dry.
the Greek had never painted before— here it comes: a blue guitar a street a horse.
he’s good
in his mid-forties he’s good.
he’s found a
toy.
he’s happy
now.
then I think, I wonder if he will get very good?
and I wonder if I will have to watch the rest?
the glory and the women and the women and the women and the women and the decay.
I can almost smell the bloodsuckers forming to the left.
you see,
I have fastened to him already.

my comrades

this one teaches
that one lives with his mother.
and that one is supported by a red-faced alcoholic father with the brain of a gnat.
this one takes speed and has been supported by the same woman for 14 years.
that one writes a novel every ten days but at least pays his own rent.
this one goes from place to place sleeping on couches, drinking and making his spiel.
this one prints his own books on a duplicating machine.
that one lives in an abandoned shower room in a Hollywood hotel.
this one seems to know how to get grant after grant, his life is a filling-out of forms.
this one is simply rich and lives in the best places while knocking on the best doors.
that one had breakfast with William Carlos Williams.
and this one teaches.
and that one teaches.
and this one puts out textbooks on how to do it and speaks in a cruel and dominating voice.
they are everywhere.
everybody is a writer.
and almost every writer is a poet.
poets poets poets poets poets poets poets poets poets poets poets poets
the next time the phone rings it will be a poet.
the next person at the door
will be a poet.
this one teaches
and that one lives with his mother and that one is writing the story of Ezra Pound.
oh, brothers, we are the sickest and the lowest of the breed.

soul

oh, how worried they are about my soul!
I get letters
the phone rings…
“are you going to be all right?”
they ask.
“I’ll be all right,” I tell them.
“I’ve seen so many go down the drain,”
they tell me.
“don’t worry about me,” I say.
yet, they make me nervous.
I go in and take a shower come out and squeeze a pimple on my nose.
then I go into the kitchen and make a salami and ham sandwich.
I used to live on candy bars.
now I have imported German mustard for my sandwich. I might be in danger at that.
the phone keeps ringing and the letters keep arriving.
if you live in a closet with rats and eat dry bread they like you.
you’re a genius
then.
or if you’re in the madhouse or the drunktank they call you a genius.
or if you’re drunk and shouting obscenities and vomiting your life-guts on the floor you’re a genius.
but get the rent paid up a month in advance put on a new pair of stockings go to the dentist make love to a healthy clean girl instead of a whore and you’ve lost your soul.
I’m not interested enough to ask about their souls.
I suppose I
should.

a change of habit

Shirley came to town with a broken leg and met the Chicano who smoked long slim cigars and they got a place together on Beacon street 5th floor;
the leg didn’t get in the way too much and they watched television together and Shirley cooked, on her crutches and all; there was a cat, Bogey, and they had some friends and talked about sports and Richard Nixon and how the hell to make it.
it worked for some months, Shirley even got the cast off, and the Chicano, Manuel, got a job at the Biltmore, Shirley sewed all the buttons back on Manuel’s shirts, mended and matched his socks, then one day Manuel returned to the place, and she was gone— no argument, no note, just gone, all her clothes all her stuff, and Manuel sat by the window and looked out and didn’t make his job the next day or the next day or the day after, he didn’t phone in, he lost his job, got a
ticket for parking, smoked four hundred and sixty cigarettes, got picked up for common drunk, bailed out, went to court and pleaded guilty.
when the rent was up he moved from Beacon street, he left the cat and went to live with his brother and they’d get drunk
every night
and talk about how terrible life was.
Manuel never again smoked long slim cigars because Shirley always said how handsome he looked when he did.

$$$$$$

I've always had trouble with money.

this one place I worked everybody ate hot dogs and potato chips in the company cafeteria for 3 days before each payday.

I wanted steaks,

I even went to see the manager of the cafeteria and demanded that he serve steaks. he refused.

I'd forget payday.

I had a high rate of absenteeism and payday would arrive and everybody would start talking about it.

"payday?" I'd say, "hell, is this payday? I forgot to pick up my last check…"

"stop the bullshit, man…"

"no, no, I mean it…"

I'd jump up and go down to payroll and sure enough there'd be a check and I'd come back and show it to them. "Jesus Christ, I forgot all about it…"

for some reason they'd get angry. then the payroll clerk would come around. I'd have two checks. "Jesus," I'd say, "two checks."

and they were

angry.

some of them were working two jobs.

the worst day

it was raining very hard, I didn't have a raincoat so I put on a very old coat I hadn't worn for months and I walked in a little late while they were working.

I looked in the coat for some cigarettes and found a 5 dollar bill in the side pocket: "hey, look," I said, "I just found a 5 dollar bill I didn't know I had, that's funny."

"hey, man, knock off the shit!"

"no, no, I'm *serious*, really, I remember wearing this coat when I got drunk at the bars. I've been rolled too often, I've got this fear…I take money out of my wallet and hide it all over me."

"sit down and get to work."

I reached into an inside pocket: "hey, look, here's a TWENTY! God, here's a

TWENTY I never knew I

had! I'm

RICH!"

"you're not funny, son of a bitch…"

"hey, my God, here's ANOTHER

twenty! too much, too too much…I *knew* I didn't spend all that money that night. I thought I'd been rolled again…"

I kept searching the coat. "hey! here's a ten and here's a fiver! my God…"

"listen, I'm telling you to *sit down and shut up*…"

"my God, I'm RICH…I don't even *need* this job…"

"man, sit *down*…"

I found another ten after I sat down but I didn't say anything.

I could feel waves of hatred and I was confused, they believed I had plotted the whole thing just to make them feel bad. I didn't want to. people who live on hot dogs and potato chips for 3 days before payday feel bad enough.

I sat down

leaned forward and began to go to work.

outside

it continued to

rain.

sitting in a sandwich joint

my daughter is most glorious.
we are eating a takeout snack in my car in Santa Monica.
I say, “hey, kid, my life has been good, so good.”
she looks at me.
I put my head down on the steering wheel, shudder, then I kick the door open, put on a mock-puke.
I straighten up.
she laughs
biting into her sandwich.
I pick up four french fries put them into my mouth, chew them.
it’s 5:30 p.m.
and the cars run up and down past us.
I sneak a look: we’ve got all the luck we need: her eyes are brilliant with the remainder of the day, and she’s grinning.

doom and siesta time

my friend is worried about dying
he lives in Frisco I live in L.A.
he goes to the gym and works with the iron and hits the big bag.
old age diminishes him.
he can’t drink because of his liver.
he can do
50 pushups.
he writes me
letters
telling me
that I’m the only one who listens to him.
sure, Hal, I answer him on a postcard.
but I don’t want to pay all those gym fees.
I go to bed
with a liverwurst and onion sandwich at one p.m.
after I eat I nap
with the helicopters and vultures circling over my sagging mattress.

as crazy as I ever was

drunk and writing poems at 3 a.m.
what counts now is one more tight
pussy
before the light tilts out
drunk and writing poems at 3:15 a.m.
some people tell me that I'm famous.
what am I doing alone drunk and writing poems at 3:18 a.m.?
I'm as crazy as I ever was they don't understand that I haven't stopped hanging out of 4th floor windows by my heels— I still do right now
sitting here
writing this down I am hanging by my heels floors up: 68, 72, 101, the feeling is the same:
relentless unheroic and necessary
sitting here drunk and writing poems at 3:24 a.m.

sex

I am driving down Wilton Avenue when this girl of about 15
dressed in tight blue jeans that grip her behind like two hands steps out in front of my car I stop to let her cross the street and as I watch her contours waving she looks directly through my windshield at me with purple eyes and then blows out of her mouth the largest pink globe of bubble gum I have ever seen while I am listening to Beethoven on the car radio.
she enters a small grocery store and is gone and I am left with Ludwig.

dead now

I always wanted to ball Henry Miller, she said, but by the time I got there it was too late.
damn it, I said, you girls always arrive too late.
I've already masturbated twice today.
that wasn't his problem, she said. by the way, how come you flog-off so much?
it's the space, I said, all that space between poems and stories, it's intolerable.
you should wait, she said, you're impatient.
what do you think of Celine?
I asked.
I wanted to ball him too.
dead now, I said.
dead now, she said.
care to hear a little music? I asked.
might as well, she said.
I gave her Ives.
that's all I had left that night.

twins

hey, said my friend, I want you to meet Hangdog Harry, he reminds me of you, and I said, all right, and we went to this cheap hotel.

old men sitting around watching some program on the tv in the lobby as we went up the stairway to 209 and there was Hangdog sitting in a straight strawback chair bottle of wine at his feet last year’s calendar on the wall, “you guys sit down,” he said, “that’s the problem: man’s inhumanity to man.”

we watched him slowly roll a Bull Durham cigarette.

“I’ve got a 17 inch neck and I’ll kill anybody who fucks with me.”

he licked his cigarette then spit on the rug.

“just like home here. feel free.”

“how you feeling, Hangdog?” asked my friend.

“terrible. I’m in love with a whore, haven’t seen her in 3 or 4 weeks.”

“what you think she’s doing, Hang?”

“well, right now about now I’d say she’s sucking some turkeyneck.”

he picked up his wine bottle took a tremendous drain.

“look,” my friend said to Hangdog, “we’ve got to get going.”

“o.k., time and tide, they don’t wait…”

he looked at me:

“whatcha say your name was?”

“Salomski.”

“pleased to meet cha, kid.”

“likewise.”

we went down the stairway they were still in the lobby looking at t.v.

“what did you think of him?”

my friend asked.

“shit,” I said, “he was really all right. yes.”

the place didn't look bad

she had huge thighs and a very good laugh she laughed at everything and the curtains were yellow and I finished rolled off and before she went to the bathroom she reached under the bed and threw me a rag.

it was hard

it was stiff with other men's sperm.

I wiped off on the sheet.

when she came out she bent over and I saw all that behind as she put Mozart on.

the little girls

up in northern California he stood in the pulpit and had been reading for some time he had been reading poems about nature and the goodness of man.

he knew that everything was all right and you couldn't blame him: he was a professor and had never been in jail or in a whorehouse had never had a used car die in a traffic jam; had never needed more than 3 drinks during his wildest evening; had never been rolled, flogged, mugged, had never been bitten by a dog he got nice letters from Gary Snyder, and his face was kindly, unmarked and tender.

his wife had never betrayed him, nor had his luck.

he said, "I'm just going to read 3 more poems and then I'm going to step down and let Bukowski read."

"oh no, William," said all the little girls in their pink and blue and white and orange and lavender dresses, "oh no, William,

read some more, read some more!"

he read one more poem and then he said, "this will be the last poem that I will read."

"oh no, William," said all the little girls in their red and green see-through dresses, "oh no, William," said all the little girls in their tight blue jeans with little hearts sewn on them, "oh no, William," said all the little girls, "read more poems, read more poems!"

but he was good to his word.

he got the poem out and he climbed down and vanished. as I got up to read the little girls wiggled in their seats and some of them hissed and some of them made remarks to me which I will use at some later date.

two or three weeks later I got a letter from William saying that he *did* enjoy my reading.

a true gentleman.

I was in bed in my underwear with a 3 day hangover. I lost the envelope but I took the letter and folded it into a paper airplane such as I had learned to make in grammar school. it sailed about the room before landing between an old Racing Form and a pair of shit-stained shorts.

we have not corresponded since.

rain or shine

the vultures at the zoo (all 3 of them) sit very quietly in their caged tree and below
on the ground
are chunks of rotting meat.
the vultures are over-full.
our taxes have fed them well.
we move on to the next cage.
a man is in there sitting on the ground eating his own shit.
I recognize him as our former mailman.
his favorite expression had been: “have a beautiful day.”
that day, I did.

cold plums

eating cold plums in bed she told me about the German who owned everything on the block except the custom drapery shop and he tried to buy the custom drapery shop but the girls said, no.

the German had the best grocery store in Pasadena, his meats were high but worth the price and his vegetables and produce were very cheap and he also sold flowers. people came from all over Pasadena to go to his store but he wanted to buy the custom drapery shop and the girls kept saying, no.

one night somebody was seen running out the back door of the drapery shop and there was a fire and almost everything was destroyed— they'd had a tremendous inventory, they tried to save what was left had a fire sale but it didn't work

they had to sell, finally, and then the German owned the drapery shop but it just sits there, vacant, the German's wife tried to make a go of it she tried to sell little baskets and things but it didn't work.

we finished the plums.

"that was a sad story," I told her.

then she bent down and began sucking me off.

the windows were open and you could hear me hollering all over the neighborhood at 5:30 in the evening.

girls coming home

the girls are coming home in their cars and I sit by the window and watch.
there’s a girl in a red dress driving a white car there’s a girl in a blue dress driving a blue car.
there’s a girl in a pink dress driving a red car.
as the girl in the red dress gets out of the white car I look at her legs
as the girl in the blue dress gets out of the blue car I look at her legs as the girl in the pink dress gets out of the red car I look at her legs.
the girl in the red dress who got out of the white car had the best legs
the girl in the pink dress who got out of the red car had average legs
but I keep remembering the girl in the blue dress who got out of the blue car
I saw her panties
you don’t know how exciting life can get around here at 5:35 p.m.

some picnic

which reminds me I shacked with Jane for 7 years she was a drunk I loved her
my parents hated her I hated my parents we made a nice foursome
one day we went on a picnic together up in the hills and we played cards and drank beer and ate potato salad
they treated her as if she were a living person at last
everybody laughed I didn't laugh.
later at my place over the whiskey I said to her, I don't like them but it's good they treated you nice.
you damn fool, she said, don't you see?
see what?
they kept looking at my beer-belly,
they think I'm pregnant.
oh, I said, well here's to our beautiful child.
here's to our beautiful child, she said.
we drank them down.

bedpans

in the hospitals I’ve been in you see the crosses on the walls with the thin palm leaves behind them yellowed and browned
it is the signal to accept the inevitable
but what really hurts are the bedpans hard under your ass you’re dying and you’re supposed to sit up on this impossible thing and urinate and defecate
while in the bed next to yours a family of 5 brings good cheer to an incurable heart-case cancer-case
or a case of general rot.
the bedpan is a merciless rock a horrible mockery because nobody wants to drag your failing body to the crapper and back.
you’d drag it
but they’ve got the bars up: you’re in your crib your tiny death-crib and when the nurse comes back an hour and a half later
and there’s nothing in the bedpan she gives you a most intemperate look
as if when nearing death one should be able to do the common common things again and again.
but if you think that’s bad just relax and let it go
all of it
into the sheets
then you’ll hear it not only from the nurse but from all the other patients…
the hardest part of dying is that they expect you to go out like a rocket shot into the night sky.
sometimes that can be done
but when you need the bullet and the gun you’ll look up and find
that the wires above your head connected to the button years ago have been cut
snipped
eliminated
been
made
useless as

the bedpan.

the good loser

red face Texas
and age
he’s at an L.A.
racetrack been talking to a group of folks.
it’s the 4th race and he’s ready to leave: “well, goodbye, folks and God bless, see you around tomorrow…”
“nice fellow.”
“yeh.”
he’s going to the parking lot to get into a 12 year old car
from there he’ll drive to a roominghouse
his room will neither have a toilet nor a bath
his room will have one window with a torn paper shade and outside will be
a crumbling cement wall spray-can graffiti courtesy of a Chicano youth gang
he’ll take off his shoes and get on the bed
it will be dark but he won’t turn on the light
he’s got nothing to do.

an art

all the way from Mexico straight from the fields to 14 wins 13 by k.o.
he was ranked #3
and in a tune-up fight he was k.o'd by an unranked black fighter who hadn't fought in 2 years.
all the way from Mexico straight from the fields the drink and the women had gotten to him.
in the rematch he was k.o'd again and suspended for 6 months.
all that way
for the bottle and 2 cases of v.d.
he came back in a year swearing he was clean, he'd learned.
and he earned a draw with the 9th ranked in his division.
he came back for the rematch and the fight was stopped in the 3rd round because he couldn't protect himself.
and he went all the way back to Mexico straight to the fields.
it takes a damned good poet like me to handle drink and women evade v.d.
write about failures like him
and hold my ranking in the top 10: all the way from Germany straight from the factories among beerbottles and the ringing of the phone.

the girls at the green hotel

are more beautiful than movie stars and they lounge on the lawn sunbathing and one sits in a short dress and high heels, legs crossed exposing miraculous thighs.
she has a bandanna on her head and smokes a long cigarette.
traffic slows almost stops.
the girls ignore the traffic.
they are half asleep in the afternoon they are whores they are whores without souls and they are magic because they lie about nothing.
I get in my car wait for traffic to clear, drive across the street to the green hotel to my favorite:
she is
sun-bathing on the lawn nearest the curb.
“hello,” I say.
she turns eyes like imitation diamonds up at me.
her face has no expression.
I drop my latest book of poems out the car window.
it falls
by her side.
I shift into low,
drive off.
there’ll be some laughs tonight.

a good one

I get too many phone calls.
they seek the creature out.
they shouldn’t.
I never phoned Knut Hamsun or Ernie or Celine.
I never phoned Salinger I never phoned Neruda.
tonight I got a call:
“hello. you Charles Bukowski?”
“yes.”
“well, I got a house.”
“yes?”
“a bordello.”
“I understand.”
“I’ve read your books. I’ve got a
houseboat in Sausalito.”
“all right.”
“I want to give you my phone number. you ever come to San Francisco I’ll buy you a drink.”
“o.k. give me the number.”
I took it down.
“we run a class joint. we’re after lawyers and state senators, upper class citizens, muggers, pimps, the like.”
“I’ll phone you when I get up there.”
“lots of the girls read your books. they love you.”
“yeah?”
“yeah.”
we said goodbye.
I liked that phone call.

shit time

half drunk
I left her place her warm blankets and I was hungover didn’t even know what town it was.
I walked along and I couldn’t find my car.
but I knew it was somewhere.
and then I was lost too.
I walked around. it was a Wednesday morning and I could see the ocean to the south.
but all that drinking: the shit was about to pour out of me.
I walked towards the sea.
I saw a brown brick structure at the edge of the sea.
I walked in. there was an old guy groaning on one of the pots.
“hi, buddy,” he said.
“hi,” I said.
“it’s hell out there, isn’t it?” the old guy asked.
“it is,” I answered.
“need a drink?”
“never before noon.”
“what time you got?”
“11:58.”
“we got two minutes.”
I wiped, flushed, pulled up my pants and walked over.
the old man was still on his pot, groaning.
he pointed to a bottle of wine at his feet it was almost done and I picked it up and took about half what remained.
I handed him a very old and wrinkled dollar then walked outside on the lawn and puked it up.
I looked at the ocean and the ocean looked good, full of blues and greens and sharks.
I walked back out of there and down the street determined to find my automobile.

it took me one hour and 15 minutes and when I found it I got in and drove off pretending that I knew just as much as the next man.

madness

I don’t beat the walls with my fists I just sit but it rushes in
a tide of it.
the woman in the court behind me howls, weeps every night.
sometimes the county comes and takes her away for a day or two.
I believed she was suffering the loss of a great love until one day she came over and told me about it— she had lost 8 apartment houses to a gigolo who had swindled her out of them.
she was howling and weeping over loss of property.
she began weeping as she told me then with a mouth lined with stale lipstick and smelling of garlic and onions she kissed me and told me: “Hank, nobody loves you if you don’t have money.”
she’s old, almost as old as I am.
she left, still weeping…
the other morning at 7:30 a.m. two black attendants came with their stretcher, only they knocked on my door.
“come on, man,” said the tallest one.
“wait,” I said, “there’s a mistake.”
I was terribly hungover standing in my torn bathrobe hair hanging down over my eyes.
“this is the address they gave us, man, this is 5437 and 2/5’s isn’t it?”
“yes.”
“come on, man, don’t give us no shit.”
“the lady you want is in the back there.”
they both walked around back.
“this door here?”
“no, no, that’s my back door. look go up those steps behind you there. it’s the door to the east, the one with the mailbox hanging loose.”
they went up and banged on the door. I watched them take her away. they didn’t use the stretcher. she walked between them.
and the thought occurred to me that they were taking the wrong one but I wasn’t sure.

a 56 year old poem

I went with two ladies
down to Venice
to look for antique furniture.
I parked in back of the store and went in with them.
$125 for a clock, $700 for 6 chairs.
I stopped looking.
the ladies moved around looking at everything.
the ladies had class.
I waved goodbye to one of the ladies and walked out.
it was Sunday and the bar wasn’t much better, everybody was nervous and young and blonde and pale.
I finished my drink, got 4 beers at the liquor store and sat in my car drinking them.
finishing the 4th beer the ladies came out.
they asked me if I was all right.
I told them that every experience meant something and that they had pulled me out of my usual murky current.
the one I knew best had bought a table with a marble top for $100.
she owned her own business and was a civilized person.
she was civilized enough to know a neighbor who had a van and while I sat in her apartment drinking 1974 *Zeller Schwarze Katz* they went down and got the table.
later she wanted to know what I thought about the table and I said I thought it was all right, sometimes I lost one hundred dollars at the racetrack. we watched tv in bed and later that night I couldn’t come. I think it was because I was thinking about that marble table.
I’m sure it was. I don’t have any antique marble tables at my place, I almost never have any sex trouble at my place. sometimes but very seldom.
I don’t understand the whole antique business
I’m sure it’s a giant
con.

the beautiful young girl walking past the graveyard—

I stop my car at the signal I see her walking past the graveyard—
as she walks past the iron fence I can see through the iron fence and I see the headstones and the green lawn.
her body moves in front of the iron fence the headstones do not move.
I think,
doesn’t anybody else see this?
I think,
does she see those headstones?
if she does
she has wisdom that I don’t have for she appears to ignore them.
her body moving in its magic fluid and her long hair is lighted by the 3 p.m. sun.
the signal changes she crosses the street to the west I drive west.
I drive my car down to the ocean get out and run up and down in front of the sea for 35 minutes
seeing people here and there with eyes and ears and toes and various other parts.
nobody seems to care.

beer

I don’t know how many bottles of beer I have consumed while waiting for things to get better.
I don’t know how much wine and whiskey and beer mostly beer
I have consumed after splits with women— waiting for the phone to ring waiting for the sound of footsteps, and the phone never rings until much later and the footsteps never arrive until much later.
when my stomach is coming up out of my mouth they arrive as fresh as spring flowers: “what the hell have you done to yourself?
it will be 3 days before you can fuck me!”
the female is durable she lives seven and one half years longer than the male, and she drinks very little beer because she knows it’s bad for the figure.
while we are going mad they are out dancing and laughing with horny cowboys.
well, there’s beer sacks and sacks of empty beer bottles and when you pick one up the bottles fall through the wet bottom
of the paper sack rolling
clanking
spilling grey wet ash and stale beer, or the sacks fall over at 4 a.m.
in the morning
making the only sound in your life.
beer
rivers and seas of beer beer beer beer the radio singing love songs as the phone remains silent and the walls stand straight up and down and beer is all there is.

artist

all of a sudden I’m a painter.
a girl from Galveston gives me $50 for a painting of a man holding a candycane while floating in a darkened sky.
than a young man with a black beard comes over and I sell him three for $80.
he likes rugged stuff where I write across the painting— “shoot shit” or “GRATE ART IS
HORSESHIT, BUY TACOS.”
I can do a painting in 5 minutes.
I use acrylics, paint right out of the tube.
I do the left side of the painting first with my left hand and then finish the right side with my right hand.
now the man with the black beard comes back with a friend whose hair sticks out and they have a young blonde girl with them.
black beard is still a sucker: I sell him a hunk of shit— an orange dog with the word “DOG” written on his side.
stick-out hair wants 3 paintings for which I ask $70.
he doesn’t have the money.
I keep the paintings but he promises to send me a girl called Judy in garter belt and high heels.
he’s already told her about me: “a world-renowned writer,” he said and she said, “oh no!” and pulled her dress up over her head.
“I want that,” I told him.
then we haggled over terms I wanted to fuck her first
then get head later.
“how about head first and fuck later?” he asked.
“that doesn’t work,” I said.
so we agreed:
Judy will come by and afterwards I will hand her the 3 paintings.
so there we are:
back to the barter system, the only way to beat inflation.

never the less,
I’d like to
start the Men’s Liberation Movement: I want a woman to hand *me* 3 of her paintings after I have made love to her, and if she can’t paint she can leave me a couple of golden earrings or maybe a slice of ear in memory of one who could.

my old man

16 years old
during the depression I’d come home drunk and all my clothing— shorts, shirts, stockings— suitcase, and pages of short stories would be thrown out on the front lawn and about the street.
my mother would be waiting behind a tree: “Henry, Henry, don’t go in… he’ll kill you, he’s read your stories…”
“I can whip his ass…”
“Henry, please take this…and find yourself a room.”
but it worried him that I might not finish high school so I’d be back again.
one evening he walked in with the pages of one of my short stories (which I had never submitted
to him)
and he said, “this is a great short story.”
I said, “o.k.,”
and he handed it to me and I read it.
it was a story about a rich man who had a fight with his wife and had gone out into the night for a cup of coffee and had observed the waitress and the spoons and forks and the salt and pepper shakers and the neon sign in the window and then had gone back to his stable to see and touch his favorite horse who then kicked him in the head and killed him.
somehow
the story held meaning for him though when I had written it I had no idea of what I was writing about.
so I told him, “o.k., old man, you can have it.”
and he took it and walked out and closed the door.
I guess that’s as close
as we ever got.

fear

he walks up to my Volks after I have parked and rocks it back and forth grinning around his cigar.
“hey, Hank, I notice all the women around your place lately…good looking stuff; you’re doing all right.”
“Sam,” I say, “that’s not true; I am one of God’s most lonely men.”
“we got some nice girls at the parlor, you oughta try some of them.”
“I’m afraid of those places, Sam, I can’t walk into them.”
“I’ll send you a girl then, real nice stuff.”
“Sam, don’t send me a whore, I always fall in love with whores.”
“o.k., friend,” he says, “let me know if you change your mind.”
I watch him walk away.
some men are always on top of their game.
I am mostly always confused.
he can break a man in half
and doesn’t know who Mozart is.
who wants to listen to music
anyhow
on a rainy Wednesday night?

little tigers everywhere

Sam the whorehouse man has squeaky shoes and he walks up and down the court squeaking and talking to the cats.
he's 310 pounds,
a killer
and he talks to the cats.
he sees the women at the massage parlor and has no girlfriends no automobile he doesn't drink or dope his biggest vices are chewing on a cigar and feeding all the cats in the neighborhood.
some of the cats get pregnant and so finally there are more and more cats and everytime I open my door one or two cats will run in and sometimes I'll forget they are there and they'll shit under the bed or I'll awaken at night hearing sounds leap up with my blade sneak into the kitchen and find one of Sam the whorehouse man's cats walking around on the sink or sitting on top of the refrigerator.
Sam runs the love parlor around the corner and his girls stand in the doorway in the sun and the traffic signals go red and green and red and green and all of Sam's cats possess some of the meaning as do the days and the nights.

after the reading:

"…I've seen people in front of their typewriters in such a bind that it would blow their intestines right out of their assholes if they were trying to shit."

"ah hahaha hahaha!"

"…it's a shame to work *that* hard to try to write."

"ah hahaha hahaha!"

"ambition rarely has anything to do with talent. luck is best, and talent limps along a little bit behind luck."

"ah haha."

he rose and left with an 18 year old virgin, the most beautiful co-ed of them all.

I closed my notebook got up and limped a little bit behind them.

about cranes

sometimes after you get your ass kicked real good by the forces
you often wish you were a crane standing on one leg
in blue water
but there’s the
old up-bringing you know:
you don’t want to be a crane standing on one leg
in blue water
the distress is not enough
and
the victory limps
a crane can’t buy a piece of ass
or
hang itself at noon in Monterey
those are some of the things
humans can do
besides stand on one leg

a gold pocket watch

my grandfather was a tall German with a strange smell on his breath.

he stood very straight in front of his small house and his wife hated him and his children thought him odd.

I was six the first time we met and he gave me all his war medals.

the second time I met him he gave me his gold pocket watch.

it was very heavy and I took it home and wound it very tight and it stopped running which made me feel bad.

I never saw him again and my parents never spoke of him nor did my grandmother who had long ago stopped living with him.

once I asked about him and they told me he drank too much

but I liked him best standing very straight in front of his house and saying, “hello, Henry, you and I, we know each other.”

beach trip

the strong men the muscle men there they sit down at the beach cocoa tans with the weights scattered about them untouched
they sit as the waves go in and out
they sit as the stock market makes and breaks men and families
they sit while one punch of a button could turn their turkeynecks to black and shriveled matchsticks
they sit while suicides in green rooms trade it in for space
they sit while former Miss Americas weep before wrinkled mirrors
they sit
they sit with less life-flow than apes and my woman stops and looks at them: “oooh oooh oooh,” she says.
I walk off with my woman as the waves go in and out.
“there’s something wrong with them,” she said, “what is it?”
“their love only runs in one direction.”
the seagulls whirl and the sea runs in and out
and we left them back there
wasting themselves time
this moment the seagulls the sea
the sand.

one for the shoeshine man

the balance is preserved by the snails climbing the Santa Monica cliffs; the luck is in walking down Western Avenue and having the girls in a massage parlor holler at you, “Hello, Sweetie!”

the miracle is having 5 women in love with you at the age of 55, and the goodness is that you are only able to love one of them.

the gift is having a daughter more gentle than you are, whose laughter is finer than yours.

the peace comes from driving a blue 67 Volks through the streets like a teenager, radio tuned to The Host Who Loves You Most, feeling the sun, feeling the solid hum of the rebuilt motor as you needle through traffic.

the grace is being able to like rock music, symphony music, jazz…

anything that contains the original energy of joy.

and the probability that returns is the deep blue low yourself flat upon yourself within the guillotine walls angry at the sound of the phone or anybody’s footsteps passing; but the other probability— the lilting high that always follows— makes the girl at the checkstand in the supermarket look like Marilyn like Jackie before they got her Harvard lover

like the girl in high school that we all followed home.

there is that which helps you believe in something else besides death: somebody in a car approaching on a street too narrow, and he or she pulls aside to let you by, or the old fighter Beau Jack shining shoes after blowing the entire bankroll on parties on women

on parasites,

humming, breathing on the leather, working the rag looking up and saying: “what the hell, I had it for a while. that beats the other.”

I am bitter sometimes but the taste has often been sweet, it’s only that I’ve feared to say it. it’s like when your woman says, “tell me you love me,” and you can’t.

if you see me grinning from my blue Volks

running a yellow light driving straight into the sun I will be locked in the arms of a crazy life

thinking of trapeze artists of midgets with big cigars of a Russian winter in the early 40’s of Chopin with his bag of Polish soil
of an old waitress bringing me an extra cup of coffee and laughing as she does so.
the best of you
I like more than you think.
the others don’t count except that they have fingers and heads and some of them eyes and most of them legs and all of them good and bad dreams
and a way to go.
justice is everywhere and it’s working and the machine guns and the frogs and the hedges will tell you so.

About the Author

CHARLES BUKOWSKI is one of America's best-known contemporary writers of poetry and prose, and, many would claim, its most influential and imitated poet. He was born in Andernach, Germany, to an American soldier father and a German mother in 1920, and brought to the United States at the age of three. He was raised in Los Angeles and lived there for fifty years. He published his first story in 1944 when he was twenty-four and began writing poetry at the age of thirty-five. He died in San Pedro, California, on March 9, 1994, at the age of seventy-three shortly after completing his last novel, *Pulp* (1994).

During his lifetime he published more than forty-five books of poetry and prose, including the novels *Post Office* (1971), *Factotum* (1975), *Women* (1978), *Ham on Rye* (1982), and *Hollywood* (1989). Among his most recent books are the posthumous editions of *What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire (1999), Open All Night: New Poems (2000), Beerspit Night and Cursing: The Correspondence of Charles Bukowski and Sheri Martinelli* (2001), and *Night Torn Mad with Footsteps: New Poems* (2001).

All of his books have now been published in translation in more than a dozen languages and his worldwide popularity remains undiminished. In the years to come Ecco will publish additional volumes of previously uncollected poetry and letters.

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CHARLES

HOT WATER MUSIC

BUKOWSKI

CHARLES BUKOWSKI
HOT WATER MUSIC

HarperCollins e-books

for Michael Montfort

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LESS DELICATE THAN THE LOCUST

"Balls," he said, "I'm tired of painting. Let's go out. I'm tired of the stink of oils, I'm tired of being great. I'm tired of waiting to die. Let's go out."

"Go out where?" she asked.

"Anywhere. Eat, drink, see."

"Jorg," she said, "what will I do when you die?"

"You will eat, sleep, fuck, piss, shit, clothe yourself, walk around and bitch."

"I need security."

"We all do."

"I mean, we're not married. I won't even be able to collect your insurance."

"That's all right, don't worry about it. Besides, you don't believe in marriage, Arlene."

Arlene was sitting in the pink chair reading the afternoon newspaper. "You say five thousand women want to sleep with you. Where does that leave me?"

"Five thousand and one."

"You think I can't get another man?"

"No, there's no problem for you. You can get another man in three minutes."

"You think I need a great painter?"

"No, you don't. A good plumber would do."

"Yes, as long as he loved me."

"Of course. Put on your coat. Let's go out."

They came down the stairway from the top loft. All around were cheap, roach-filled rooms, but nobody seemed to be starving: they always seemed to be cooking things in large pots and sitting around, smoking, cleaning their fingernails, drinking cans of beer or sharing a tall blue bottle of white wine, screaming at each other or laughing, or farting, belching, scratching or asleep in front of the tv. Not many people in the world had very much money but the less money they had the better they seemed to live. Sleep, clean sheets, food, drink and hemorrhoid ointment were their only needs. And they always left their doors a bit open.

"Fools," said Jorg as they walked down the stairway, "they twaddle away their lives and clutter up mine."

"Oh, Jorg," Arlene sighed. "You just don't *like* people, do you?"

Jorg arched an eyebrow at her, didn't answer. Arlene's response to his feelings for the masses was always the same—as if not loving the people revealed an unforgivable shortcoming of soul. But she was an excellent fuck and pleasant to have around—most of the time.

They reached the boulevard and walked along, Jorg with his red and white beard and broken yellow teeth and bad breath, purple ears, frightened eyes, stinking torn overcoat and white ivory cane. When he felt worst he felt best. "Shit," he said, "everything shits until it dies."

Arlene bobbled her ass, making no secret of it, and Jorg pounded the pavement with his cane, and even the sun looked down and said, Ho ho. Finally they reached the old dingy building where Serge lived. Jorg and Serge had both been painting for many years but it was not until recently that their work sold for more than pig farts. They had starved together, now they were getting famous separately. Jorg and Arlene entered the hotel and began climbing the stairway. The smell of iodine and frying chicken was in the halls. In one room somebody was getting fucked and making no secret of it. They climbed to the top loft and Arlene knocked. The door popped open and there was Serge. "Peek-a-boo!" he said. Then he blushed. "Oh, sorry…come in."

"What the hell's the matter with you?" asked Jorg.

“Sit down. I thought it was Lila…”

“You play peek-a-boo with Lila?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Serge, you’ve got to get rid of that girl, she’s destroying your mind.”

“She sharpens my pencils.”

“Serge, she’s too young for you.”

“She’s 30.”

“And you’re 60. That’s 30 years.”

“Thirty years is too much?”

“Of course.”

“How about 20?” asked Serge, looking at Arlene.

“Twenty years is acceptable. Thirty years is obscene.”

“Why don’t you both get women your own age?” asked Arlene.

They both looked at her. “She likes to make little jokes,” said Jorg. “Yes,” said Serge, “she is funny. Come on, look, I’ll show you what I’m doing…”

They followed him into the bedroom. He took off his shoes and lay flat on the bed. “See? Like this? All the comforts.” Serge had his paint brushes on long handles and he painted on a canvas fastened to the ceiling. “It’s my back. Can’t paint ten minutes without stopping. This way I go on for hours.”

“Who mixes your colors?”

“Lila. I tell her, ‘Stick it in the blue. Now a bit of green.’ She’s quite good. Eventually I might even let her work the brushes, too, and I’ll just lay around and read magazines.”

Then they heard Lila coming up the stairway. She opened the door, came across the front room and entered the bedroom. “Hey,” she said, “I see the old fuck’s painting.”

“Yeah,” said Jorg, “he claims you hurt his back.”

“I said no such thing.”

“Let’s go out and eat,” said Arlene. Serge moaned and got up.

“Honest to Christ,” said Lila. “He just lays around like a sick frog most of the time.”

“I need a drink,” said Serge. “I’ll snap back.”

They went down to the street together and moved toward The Sheep's Tick. Two young men in their mid-20's ran up. They had on turtleneck sweaters. "Hey, you guys are the painters, Jorg Swenson and Serge Maro!"

"Get the hell out of the way!" said Serge.

Jorg swung his ivory cane. He got the shorter of the young men right on the knee. "Shit," the young man said, "you've broken my leg!"

"I hope so," said Jorg. "Maybe you'll learn some damned civility!"

They moved on toward The Sheep's Tick. As they entered a buzzing arose from the diners. The headwaiter immediately rushed up, bowing and waving menus and speaking endearments in Italian, French and Russian.

"Look at that long, black hair in his nostrils," said Serge. "Truly sickening!"

"Yes," said Jorg, and then he shouted at the waiter, "HIDE YOUR NOSE!"

"Five bottles of your best wine!" screamed Serge, as they sat down at the best table.

The headwaiter vanished. "You two are real assholes," said Lila.

Jorg ran his hand up her leg. "Two living immortals are allowed certain indiscretions."

"Get your hand off my pussy, Jorg."

"It's not your pussy. It's Serge's pussy."

"Get your hand off Serge's pussy or I'll scream."

"My will is weak."

She screamed. Jorg removed his hand. The headwaiter came toward them with the wagon and bucket of chilled wine. He rolled it up, bowed and pulled one cork. He filled Jorg's glass. Jorg drained it. "It's shit, but O.K. Open the bottles!"

"All the bottles?"

"All the bottles, asshole, and be *quick* about it!"

"He's clumsy," said Serge. "Look at him. Shall we dine?"

"Dine?" said Arlene. "All you guys do is drink. I don't think I've seen either of you eat more than a soft-boiled egg."

"Get out of my sight, coward," Serge said to the waiter.

The headwaiter vanished.

"You guys shouldn't talk to people that way," said Lila.

"We've paid our dues," said Serge.

"You've got no right," said Arlene.

"I suppose not," said Jorg, "but it's interesting."

"People don't have to take that crap," said Lila.

"People accept what they accept," said Jorg. "They accept far worse."

"It's your paintings they want, that's all," said Arlene.

"*We* are our paintings," said Serge.

"Women are stupid," said Jorg.

"Be careful," said Serge. "They also are capable of terrible acts of vengeance…"

They sat for a couple of hours drinking the wine.

"Man is less delicate than the locust," said Jorg finally.

"Man is the sewer of the universe," said Serge.

"You guys are really assholes," said Lila.

"Sure are," said Arlene.

"Let's switch tonight," said Jorg. "I'll fuck your pussy and you fuck mine."

"Oh no," said Arlene, "none of that."

"Right," said Lila.

"I feel like painting now," said Jorg. "I'm bored with drinking."

"I feel like painting, too," said Serge.

"Let's get out of here," said Jorg.

"Listen," said Lila, "you guys haven't paid the bill yet."

"*Bill*?" screamed Serge. "*You don't think we are going to pay money for this rotgut*?"

"Let's go," said Jorg.

As they rose, the head waiter came up with the bill.

"*This rotgut stinks*," screamed Serge, jumping up and down. "*I would never ask anyone to pay for stuff like this! I want you to know the proof is in the piss*!"

Serge grabbed a half-full bottle of the wine, ripped open the waiter's shirt and poured the wine over his chest. Jorg held his ivory cane like a sword. The headwaiter looked confused. He was a beautiful young man with long fingernails and an expensive apartment. He was studying chemistry and had once won second prize in an opera competition. Jorg swung his cane and caught the waiter, hard, just below the left ear. The waiter turned very white and swayed. Jorg hit him three more times in the same spot and he dropped.

They walked out together, Serge, Jorg, Lila and Arlene. They were all drunk but there was a certain stature about them, something unique. They got out the door and went down the street.

A young couple seated at a table near the door had watched the entire proceedings. The young man looked intelligent, only a rather large mole near the end of his nose marred the effect. His girl was fat but lovable in a dark blue dress. She had once wanted to be a nun.

"Weren't they magnificent?" asked the young man.

"They were assholes," said the girl.

The young man waved for a third bottle of wine. It was going to be another difficult night.

SCREAM WHEN YOU BURN

Henry poured a drink and looked out the window at the hot and bare Hollywood street. Jesus Christ, it had been a long haul and he was still up against the wall. Death was next, death was always there. He'd made a dumb mistake and bought an underground newspaper and they were still idolizing Lenny Bruce. There was a photo of him, dead, right after the bad fix. All right, Lenny had been funny at times: "I can't come!"—that bit had been a masterpiece but Lenny really hadn't been all that good. Persecuted, all right, sure, physically and spiritually. Well, we all ended up dead, that was just mathematics. Nothing new. It was waiting around that was the problem. The phone rang. It was his girlfriend.

"Listen, you son of a bitch, I'm tired of your drinking. I had enough of that with my father…"

"Oh hell, it's not all that bad."

"It is, and I'm not going through it again."

"I tell you, you're making too much of it."

"No, I've had it, I tell you, I've had it. I saw you at the party, sending out for more whiskey, that's when I left. I've had it, I'm not going to take any more…"

She hung up. He walked over and poured a scotch and water. He walked into the bedroom with it, took off his shirt, pants, shoes, stockings. In his shorts he went to bed with the drink. It was 15 minutes to noon. No ambition, no talent, no chance. What kept him off the row was raw luck and luck never lasted. Well, it was too bad about Lu, but Lu wanted a winner. He emptied the glass and stretched out. He picked up Camus'

Resistance, Rebellion and Death…read some pages. Camus talked about anguish and terror and the miserable condition of Man but he talked about it in such a comfortable and flowery way…his language…that one got the feeling that things neither affected him *nor* his writing. In other words, things might as well have been fine. Camus wrote like a man who had just finished a large dinner of steak and french fries, salad, and had topped it with a bottle of good French wine. Humanity may have been suffering but not him. A wise man, perhaps, but Henry preferred somebody who screamed when they burned. He dropped the book to the floor and tried to sleep. Sleep was always difficult. If he could sleep three hours in 24 he was satisfied. Well, he thought, the walls are still here, give a man four walls and he had a chance. Out on the streets, nothing could be done.

The doorbell rang. “Hank!” somebody screamed. “Hey, Hank!”

What the shit? he thought. Now what?

“Yeah?” he asked, lying there in his shorts.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

“Wait a minute…”

He got up, picked up his shirt and pants and walked into the front room.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting dressed…”

“Getting dressed?”

“Yeah.”

It was ten minutes after 12. He opened the door. It was the professor from Pasadena who taught English lit. He had a looker with him. The prof introduced the looker. She was an editor in one of the large New York publishing houses.

“Oh you sweet thing,” he said, and walked up and squeezed her right thigh. “I love you.”

“You’re fast,” she said.

“Well, you know writers have always had to kiss the asses of publishers.”

“I thought it was the other way around.”

"It isn't. It's the writer who's starving."

"She wants to see your novel."

"All I have is a hardcover. I can't give her a hardcover."

"Let her have one. They might buy it," said the prof.

They were talking about his novel, *Nightmare*. He figured she just wanted a free copy of the novel.

"We were going to Del Mar but Pat wanted to see you in the flesh."

"How nice."

"Hank read his poems to my class. We gave him $50. He was frightened and crying. I had to push him out in front of my class."

"I was indignant. Only $50. Auden used to get $2,000. I don't think he's that much better than I am. In fact…"

"Yes, we know what you think."

Henry gathered up the old Racing Forms from around the editor's feet.

"People owe me $1100. I can't collect. The sex mags have become impossible. I've gotten to know the girl in the front office. One Clara. 'Hello, Clara,' I phone her, 'did you have a nice breakfast?' 'Oh yes, Hank, did you?' 'Sure,' I tell her, 'two hard-boiled eggs.' 'I know what you're phoning about,' she answers. 'Sure,' I tell her, 'the same thing.' 'Well, we have it right here, our p.o. 984765 for $85.' 'And there's another one, Clara, your p.o. 973895 for five stories, $570.' 'Oh yes, well I'll try to get these signed by Mr. Masters.' 'Thank you, Clara,' I tell her. 'Oh that's all right,' she says, 'you fellows deserve your money.' 'Sure,' I say. And then she says, 'And if you don't get your money you'll phone again, won't you? Ha, ha, ha.' 'Yes, Clara,' I tell her, 'I'll phone again.'"

The professor and the editor laughed.

"I can't make it, god damn it, anybody want a drink?"

They didn't answer so Henry poured himself one. "I even tried to make it playing the horses. I started well but I hit a slump. I had to stop. I can only afford to win."

The professor started to explain his system for beating twenty-one at Vegas. Henry walked over to the editor.

"Let's go to bed," he said.

"You're funny," she said.

"Yeah," he said, "like Lenny Bruce. Almost. He's dead and I'm dying."

"You're still funny."

"Yeah, I'm the hero. The myth. I'm the unspoiled one, the one who hasn't sold out. My letters are auctioning for $250 back east. I can't buy a bag of farts."

"All you writers are always hollering 'wolf.'"

"Maybe the wolf has finally arrived. You can't live off your soul. You can't pay the rent with your soul. Try it some time."

"Maybe I ought to go to bed with you," she said.

"Come on, Pat," said the prof, standing up, "we've got to make Del Mar."

They walked to the door. "It was good to see you."

"Sure," Henry said.

"You'll make it."

"Sure," he said, "goodbye."

He walked back to the bedroom, took off his clothing and got back into bed. Maybe he could sleep. Sleep was something like death. Then he was asleep. He was at the track. The man at the window was giving him money and he was putting it into his wallet. It was a lot of money.

"You ought to get a new wallet," said the man, "that one's torn."

"No," he said, "I don't want people to know I'm rich."

The doorbell rang. "Hey Hank! Hank!"

"All right, all right…wait a minute…"

He put his clothes back on and opened the door. It was Harry Stobbs. Stobbs was another writer. He knew too many writers.

Stobbs walked in.

"You got any money, Stobbs?"

"Hell no."

"All right, I'll buy the beer. I thought you were rich."

“No, I was living with this gal in Malibu. She dressed me well, fed me. She booted me out. I’m living in a shower now.”

“A shower?”

“Yes, it’s nice. Real glass sliding doors.”

“All right, let’s go. You got a car?”

“No.”

“We’ll take mine.”

They got into his ’62 Comet and drove up toward Hollywood and Normandy.

“I sold an article to *Time*. Man, I thought I was in the big money. I got their check today. I haven’t cashed it yet. Guess what it reads?” asked Stobbs.

“$800?”

“No, $165.”

“What? *Time* magazine? 165 dollars?”

“That’s right.”

They parked and went in to a small liquor store for the beer. “My woman dumped me,” Henry told Stobbs. “She claims I drink too much. A bareass lie.” He reached into the cooler for two six-packs. “I’m tapering off. Bad party last night. Nothing but starving writers, and professors who were about to lose their jobs. Shop talk. Very wearing.”

“Writers are whores,” said Stobbs, “writers are the whores of the universe.”

“The whores of the universe do much better, my friend.”

They walked to the counter.

“‘Wings of Song,’” said the owner of the liquor store.

“‘Wings of Song,’” Henry answered.

The owner had read an article in the *L.A. Times* a year ago about Henry’s poetry and had never forgotten. It was their Wings of Song routine. At first he had hated it, and now he found it amusing. Wings of Song, by god.

They got into the car and drove back. The mailman had been by. There was something in the box.

“Maybe it’s a check,” Henry said.

He took the letter inside, opened two beers and opened the letter. It said, "Dear Mr. Chinaski, I just finished reading your novel, *Nightmare*, and your book of poems, *Photographs From Hell*, and I think you're a great writer. I am a married woman, 52 years old, and my children are grown. I would very much like to hear from you. Respectfully, Doris Anderson."

The letter was from a small town in Maine.

"I didn't know that people still lived in Maine," he told Stobbs.

"I don't think they do," Stobbs said.

"They do. This one does."

Henry threw the letter in the trash sack. The beer was good. The nurses were coming home to the highrise apartment across the street. Many nurses lived there. Most of them wore see-through uniforms and the afternoon sun did the rest. He stood there with Stobbs watching them get out of their cars and walk through the glass entrance, to vanish to their showers and their tv sets and their closed doors.

"Look at that one," said Stobbs.

"Uh huh."

"There's another one."

"Oh my!"

We're acting like 15-year-olds, Henry thought. We don't deserve to live. I'll bet Camus never peeked out of windows.

"How are you going to make it, Stobbs?"

"Well, as long as I've got that shower, I've got it made."

"Why don't you get a job?"

"A job? Don't talk like a crazy man."

"I guess you're right."

"Look at that one! Look at the ass on that one!"

"Yes, indeed."

They sat down and worked at the beer.

"Mason," he told Stobbs, mentioning a young unpublished poet, "has gone to Mexico to live. He hunts meat with his bow and arrow, catches fish. He's got his wife and a servant girl. He's got four books out looking. Even wrote a Western. The problem is that when you're out of the country it's almost impossible to collect your money. The only way to collect your money is to threaten them with death. I'm good at those letters. But if you're a thousand miles away they know you'll cool off before you get to their door. I like hunting your own meat, though. It beats going to the A & P. You pretend those animals are editors and publishers. It's great."

Stobbs stayed around until 5 p.m. They bitched about writing, about how the top guys really stank. Guys like Mailer, guys like Capote. Then Stobbs left, and Henry took off his shirt, his pants, his shoes and stockings and went back to bed. The phone rang. It was on the floor near the bed. He reached down and picked it up. It was Lu.

"What are you doing? Writing?"

"I seldom write."

"Are you drinking?"

"Tapering off."

"I think you need a nurse."

"Let's go to the track tonight."

"All right. When will you be by?"

"6:30 O.K.?"

"6:30's O.K."

"Goodbye, then."

He stretched out in bed. Well, it was good to be back with Lu. She was good for him. She was right, he drank too much. If Lu drank like he did, he wouldn't want her. Be fair, man, be fair. Look what happened to Hemingway, always sitting with a drink in his hand. Look at Faulkner, look at them all. Well, shit.

The phone rang again. He picked it up.

"Chinaski?"

"Yeah?"

It was the poetess, Janessa Teel. She had a nice body but he'd never been to bed with her.

"I'd like you to come to dinner tomorrow night."

"I'm going steady with Lu," he said. God, he thought, I'm loyal. God, he thought, I'm a nice guy. God.

"Bring her with you."

"Do you think that would be wise?"

"It'll be all right with me."

"Listen, let me phone you tomorow. I'll let you know."

He hung up and stretched out again. For 30 years, he thought, I wanted to be a writer and now I'm a writer and what does it mean?

The phone rang again. It was Doug Eshlesham, the poet.

"Hank, baby…"

"Yeah, Doug?"

"I'm tapped, baby, I need a five, baby. Lemme have a fiver."

"Doug, the horses have smashed me. I'm flat, absolutely."

"Oh," said Doug.

"Sorry, baby."

"Well, all right."

Doug hung up. Doug owed him 15 right then. But he did have the fiver. He should have given Doug the fiver. Doug was probably eating dog food. I'm not a very nice guy, he thought. God, I'm not a very nice guy after all.

He stretched out in bed, full, in his unglory.

A COUPLE OF GIGOLOS

Being a gigolo is a very strange experience, especially if you’re a non-professional gigolo. The house had two floors. Comstock lived with Lynne on the upper floor. I lived with Doreen on the lower floor. The house was in a beautiful setting at the foot of the Hollywood Hills. The ladies were both executives with high paying jobs. The house was stocked with good wine, good food, and one frazzle-assed dog. There was also a large black maid, Retha, who spent most of her time in the kitchen opening and closing the refrigerator door.

All the right magazines arrived at their appointed time each month, but Comstock and I didn’t read them. We just lounged about, coming down off our hangovers, waiting for evening when the ladies would wine and dine us again on their expense accounts.

Comstock said Lynne was a very successful movie producer at a big studio. Comstock wore a beret, a silk scarf, a turquoise necklace, a beard, and he had a silken walk. I was a writer stalled on his second novel. I had my own quarters in a bombed-out apartment building in east Hollywood but I was seldom there.

My transportation was a ’62 Comet. The young lady in the house across the way took great offense to my old car. I had to park in front of her house because it was one of the few level areas in the neighborhood and my car would not start on a grade. It hardly started on level ground and I’d sit out there pumping the pedal and hitting the starter and the smoke would billow out from under the car and the noise would be obnoxious and continuous. The lady would begin to scream as if she was going mad. It was one of the few times I was ashamed of being poor. I'd sit pumping and praying to get that '62 Comet started, and try to ignore the cries of rage from her expensive home. I'd pump and pump, the car would start, run a few feet, stall again.

"*Get that stinking wreck away from in front of my house or I'll call the police*!" Then the mad long screams. Finally she'd come out in a kimono, a young blonde, beautiful, but apparently completely crazy. She'd run up to the car door screaming and one of her breasts would fall out. She'd tuck it back in and the other breast would fall out. And then a leg would pop out of her slitted kimono. "Lady, please," I'd tell her, "I'm trying."

I'd finally get the car rolling and she'd stand in the center of the street with both breasts out screaming, "*Don't park your car here again, never, never, never*!" It was at times like this that I did consider looking for a job.

My lady, Doreen, needed me, however. She had trouble with the bag boy in the supermarket. I would go along and stand by her side and give her a sense of security. She couldn't confront him alone and always ended up throwing a handful of grapes in his face or reporting him to the manager or writing a six-page letter to the owner of the market. I could handle the bag boy for her. I even liked him, especially for the way he was able to snap open a large paper bag with one graceful flick of the wrist.

My first informal meeting with Comstock was interesting. We only had chatted over drinks with our ladies in the evening. One morning I was walking around the first floor in my shorts. Doreen had gone to work. I was thinking about getting dressed and going over to my place to check the mail. Retha, the maid, was used to me in my shorts. "Oh, man," she'd say, "your legs are so white. They're like chicken legs. Don't you ever get any sun?"

There was one kitchen and that was downstairs. I guess Comstock was hungry. We walked in at the same time. He wore an old white t-shirt with a wine stain on the front. I put on some coffee and Retha offered to fry us some bacon and eggs. Comstock sat down. “Well,” I asked him, “how much longer do you think we can go on fooling them?”

“A long time. I need a rest.”

“I think I’ll hang in too.”

“You bastards are really something,” said Retha.

“Don’t burn the eggs,” said Comstock.

Retha served us our orange juice, toast, bacon and eggs. She sat down and ate with us, reading a copy of *Playgirl*.

“I’m just out of a real bad marriage,” said Comstock. “I need a long, long rest.”

“There’s strawberry jam for your toast,” said Retha. “Try some strawberry jam.”

“Tell me about *your* marriage,” I said to Retha.

“Well, I got me this lowdown no good lazy pool playin’…”

Retha told us all about him, finished her breakfast, and went upstairs and started vacuuming. Then Comstock told me about his marriage.

“Before our marriage it was fine. She showed me all her good cards but she had a half deck that she never let me see. I’d say more than a half deck.” Comstock took a gulp of his coffee.

“Three days after the ceremony I came home and she had bought some miniskirts, the shortest miniskirts you ever saw. And when I came in she was sitting there shortening them. ‘What are you doing?’ I asked her, and she said, ‘These fucking things are too long. I like to wear them without panties and I like to see men flash at my pussy when I slide off bar stools and stuff like that.’”

“She hit you with that card just like that?”

“Well, I might have had some warning. A couple of days before the marriage I took her over to meet my parents. She had on a conservative dress and my parents told her they liked it. She said, ‘You like my dress, huh?’ And she pulled her dress up and showed them her panties.”

“You probably thought it was charming.”

"In a way, yes. Anyhow, she started going around without panties in the miniskirts. They were so short that if she ducked her head you could see her bunghole."

"Did the boys like it?"

"I guess they did. When we'd walk into a place they'd look at her, then at me. They'd sit there thinking how can a guy go along with that?"

"Well, we all have our ways. What the hell. A pussy and a bunghole are only that. You can't make any more than that out of them."

"You might think that way until it happens to you. We'd leave a bar, get outside, and she'd say, 'Hey, did you see the bald guy in the corner? He really flashed on my pussy when I got up! I bet he goes home and beats off.'"

"Can I pour you another coffee?"

"Sure, and put in some scotch. You can call me Roger."

"Sure, Roger."

"I came home from work one evening and she was gone. She's broken every window and mirror in the place. She's written things like, '*Roger ain't shit!*' '*Roger sucks assholes!*' '*Roger drinks piss*!' all over the walls. And she's gone. She's left a note. She's going to take a bus home to her mother in Texas. She's worried. Her mother has been in the madhouse ten times. Her mother needs her. That's what the note said."

"Another coffee, Roger?"

"Just the scotch. I went down to Greyhound and there she is in a miniskirt, flashing pussy, 18 guys circling around her with erections. I sat down next to her and she starts crying. 'A black guy,' she tells me, 'says I can make $1,000 a week if I do what he says. I ain't no whore, Roger!'"

Retha came back down the stairs, hit the refrigerator for some chocolate cake and ice cream, went into the bedroom, turned on the tv, lay down on the bed and started eating. She was a very heavy woman, but pleasant.

"Anyhow," said Roger, "I told her I loved her and we managed to get a refund on the ticket. I took her home. The next night a friend of mine comes over and she creeps up behind him and hits him over the head with a wooden salad spoon. No warning, no nothing. She just creeps up and whacks him. After he leaves she tells me that she'll be all right if I let her go to a ceramics class every Wednesday evening. All right, I say. But nothing works. She takes to attacking me with knives. There's blood everywhere. My blood. It's on the walls and in the rugs. She's very swift on her feet. She's into ballet, yoga, herbs, vitamins, eats seeds, nuts, all that shit, carries a bible in her purse, half the pages underlined in red ink. She shortens all her skirts another half inch. One night, I'm asleep and I wake up just in time. She's flying over the foot of the bed screaming, butcher knife in hand. I roll over and the knife plunges into the mattress five or six inches. I get up and knock her against the wall. She goes down and says, '*You coward! You dirty coward, you hit a woman! You're yellow, yellow, yellow*!'"

"Well, I guess you shouldn't have hit her," I said.

"Anyhow, I moved out and began divorce proceedings but that wasn't the end of her. She kept following me. Once I was in the checkout line at a supermarket. She walked in and screamed at me, '*You dirty cocksucker! You fag*!' Another time she cornered me in a laundromat. I was taking my clothes out of the washer and putting them in the dryer. She just stood there and looked at me and didn't say anything. I left the clothes, got in my car and drove off. When I returned she wasn't there. I looked in the dryer and it was empty. She had taken my shirts, my shorts, my pants, my towels, my bedsheets, everything. I started getting letters in the mail written in red ink about her dreams. She dreamed all the time. And she'd cut out photographs from magazines and write all over them. I couldn't decipher the writing. I'd be sitting in my apartment at night and she'd walk by and throw gravel at my window and holler, '*Roger Comstock is a fairy*.' You could hear her for blocks."

"It all sounds very lively."

"Then I met Lynne and moved up here. I moved in the early morning. She doesn't know where I am. I quit my job. And here

I am. I think I'll take Lynne's dog for a walk. She likes that. When she gets back from work I say, 'Hey, Lynne, I took your dog for a walk.' Then she smiles. She likes that."

"O.K.," I said.

"Hey, Boner!" Roger hollered. "Come on, Boner!" The idiot creature, soft of belly, salivated in. They left together.

I only lasted three more months. Doreen met some guy who could speak three languages and was an Egyptologist. I went back to my bombed-out court in east Hollywood.

I was coming out of my dentist's office in Glendale one day nearly a year later and there was Doreen getting into her car. I walked over and we went into a cafe and had coffee.

"How's the novel?" she asked.

"Still stalled," I said. "I don't think I'll ever finish the son of a bitch."

"You alone now?" she asked.

"No."

"I'm not alone either."

"Good."

"It's not good but it's all right."

"Is Roger still up there with Lynne?"

"She was going to dump him," Doreen told me. "Then he got drunk and fell off the balcony. He was paralyzed from the waist down. He collected $50,000 from the insurance company. Then he got better. Went from crutches to cane. He's able to walk Boner again. He recently took some marvelous photographs of Olvera Street. Listen, I've got to run. I'm going to London next week. A working vacation. All expenses paid! Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

Doreen jumped up, smiled, walked out, turned west and was gone. I lifted my coffeecup, took a sip, put it back down. The check lay on the table. $1.85. I had $2 which would just cover it plus the tip. How the hell I was going to pay my dentist was another matter.

THE GREAT POET

I went to see him. He was the great poet. He was the best narrative poet since Jeffers, still under 70 and famous throughout the world. Perhaps his two best-known books were *My Grief Is Better Than Your Grief, Ha*! and *The Dead Chew Gum in Languor*. He had taught at many universities, had won all the prizes, including the Nobel Prize. Bernard Stachman.

I climbed the steps of the YMCA. Mr. Stachman lived in Room 223. I knocked. “HELL, COME ON IN!” somebody screamed from inside. I opened the door and walked in. Bernard Stachman was in bed. The smell of vomit, wine, urine, shit and decaying food was in the air. I began to gag. I ran to the bathroom, vomited, then came out.

“Mr. Stachman,” I said, “why don’t you open a window?”

“That’s a good idea. And don’t give me any of that ‘Mr. Stachman’ shit, I’m Barney.”

He was crippled, and after a great effort he managed to pull himself out of the bed and into the chair at his side. “Now for a good talk,” he said. “I’ve been waiting for this.”

At his elbow, on a table, was a gallon jug of dago red filled with cigarette ashes and dead moths. I looked away, then looked back. he had the jug to his mouth but most of the wine ran right back out, down his shirt, down his pants. Bernard Stachman put the jug back. “Just what I needed.”

“You ought to use a glass,” I said. “It’s easier.”

“Yes, I believe you’re right.” He looked around. There were a few dirty glasses and I wondered which one he would choose. He chose the nearest one. The bottom of the glass was filled with a hardened yellow substance. It looked like the remains of chicken and noodles. He poured the wine. Then he lifted the glass and emptied it. “Yes, that’s much better. I see you brought your camera. I guess you came to photograph me?”

“Yes,” I said. I went over and opened the window and breathed in the fresh air. It had been raining for days and the air was fresh and clear.

“Listen,” he said, “I been meaning to piss for hours. Bring me an empty bottle.” There were many empty bottles. I brought him one. He didn’t have a zipper, just buttons, with only the bottom button fastened because he was so bloated. He reached in and got his penis and rested the head on the lip of the bottle. The moment he began to urinate his penis stiffened and waved about, spraying piss all over—on his shirt, on his pants, in his face, and unbelievably, the last spurt went into his left ear.

“It’s hell being crippled,” he said.

“How did it happen?” I asked.

“How did what happen?”

“Being crippled.”

“My wife. She ran me over with her car.”

“How? Why?”

“She said she couldn’t stand me anymore.”

I didn’t say anything. I took a couple of photos.

“I got photos of my wife. Want to see some photos of my wife?”

“All right.”

“The photo album is there on top of the refrigerator.”

I walked over and got it, sat down. There were just shots of high-heeled shoes and a woman’s trim ankles, nylon-covered legs with garter belts, assorted legs in panty hose. On some of the pages were pasted ads from the meat market: chuck roast, 89¢ a pound. I closed the album. “When we divorced,” he said, “she gave me these.” Bernard reached under the pillow on his bed and pulled out a pair of high-heeled shoes with long spike heels. He’d had them bronzed. He stood them on the night table. Then he poured another drink. “I sleep with those shoes,” he said, “I make love to those shoes and then wash them out.”

I took some more photos.

“Here, you want a photo? Here’s a good photo.” He unbuttoned the lone button on his pants. He didn’t have on any underwear. He took the heel of the shoe and wiggled it up his behind. “Here, take this one.” I got the photo.

It was difficult for him to stand but he managed by holding onto the night table.

“Are you still writing, Barney?”

“Hell, I write all the time.”

“Don’t your fans interrupt your work?”

“Oh hell, sometimes the women find me but they don’t stay long.”

“Are your books selling?”

“I get royalty checks.”

“What is your advice to young writers?”

“Drink, fuck and smoke plenty of cigarettes.”

“What is your advice to older writers?”

“If you’re still alive, you don’t need any advice.”

“What is the impulse that makes you create a poem?”

“What makes you take a shit?”

“What do you think of Reagan and unemployment?”

“I don’t think of Reagan or unemployment. It all bores me. Like space flights and the Super Bowl.”

“What are your concerns then?”

“Modern women.”

“Modern women?”

“They don’t know how to dress. Their shoes are dreadful.”

“What do you think of Women’s Liberation?”

“Any time they’re willing to work the car washes, get behind the plow, chase down the two guys who just held up the liquor store, or clean up the sewers, anytime they’re ready to get their tits shot off in the army, I’m ready to stay home and wash the dishes and get bored picking lint off the rug.”

“But isn’t there some logic in their demands?”

"Of course."

Stachman poured another drink. Even drinking from the glass, part of the wine dribbled down his chin and onto his shirt. He had the body odor of a man who hadn't bathed in months. "My wife," he said, "I'm still in love with my wife. Hand me that phone, will you?" I handed the phone to him. He dialed a number. "Claire? Hello, Claire?" He put the receiver down.

"What happened?" I asked.

"The usual. She hung up. Listen, let's get out of here, let's go to a bar. I've been in this damned room too long. I need to get out."

"But it's raining. It's been raining for a week. The streets are flooded."

"I don't care. I want to get out. She's probably fucking some guy right now. She's probably got her high heels on. I always made her leave her high heels on."

I helped Bernard Stachman get into an old brown overcoat. All the buttons were missing off the front. It was stiff with grime. It was hardly an L.A. overcoat, it was heavy and clumsy, it must have come from Chicago or Denver in the thirties.

Then we got his crutches and we climbed painfully down the YMCA stairway. Bernard had a fifth of muscatel in one of the pockets. We reached the entrance and Bernard assured me he could make it across the sidewalk and into the car. I was parked some distance from the curbing.

As I ran around to the other side to get in I heard a shout and then a splash. It was raining, and raining hard. I ran back around and Bernard had managed to fall and wedge himself in the gutter between the car and the curbing. The water swept around him, he was sitting up, the water rushed over him, ran down through his pants, lapped against his sides, the crutches floating sluggishly in his lap.

"It's all right," he said, "just drive on and leave me."

"Oh hell, Barney."

"I mean it. Drive on. Leave me. My wife doesn't love me."

"She's not your wife, Barney. You're divorced."

"Tell that to the Marines."

"Come on, Barney, I'm going to help you up."

"No, no. It's all right. I assure you. Just go ahead. Get drunk without me."

I picked him up, got the door open and lifted him into the front seat. He was very, very wet. Streams of water ran across the floorboards. Then I went around to the other side and got in. Barney unscrewed the cap off the bottle of muscatel, took a hit, passed the bottle to me. I took a hit. Then I started the car and drove, looking out through the windshield into the rain for a bar that we might possibly enter and not vomit the first time we got the look and smell of the urinal.

YOU KISSED LILLY

It was a Wednesday night. The television hadn't been much good. Theodore was 56. His wife, Margaret, was 50. They had been married 20 years and had no children. Ted turned off the light. They stretched out in the dark.

"Well," said Margy, "aren't you going to kiss me goodnight?"

Ted sighed and turned to her. He gave her a light kiss.

"You call that a kiss?"

Ted didn't answer.

"That woman on the program looked just like Lilly, didn't she?"

"I don't know."

"You know."

"Listen, don't start anything and there won't be anything."

"You just don't want to *discuss* things. You just want to clam up. Be honest now. That woman on the progam looked like Lilly, didn't she?"

"All right. There *was* a similarity."

"Did it make you think of Lilly?"

"Oh Christ…"

"Don't be evasive! Did it make you think of her?"

"For a moment or so, yes…"

"Did it make you feel good?"

"No, listen, Marge, that thing happened five years ago!"

"Does time change what happens?"

"I told you I was sorry."

"*Sorry*! Do you know what you *did* to me? Suppose I had done that with some man? How would *you* feel?"

"I don't know. Do it and then I'll know."

"Oh, now you're being *flip*! It's a joke!"

"Marge, we've discussed this thing four or five hundred nights."

"When you were making love to Lilly did you kiss her like you kissed *me* tonight?"

"No, I guess not…"

"How then? How?"

"Jesus, stop it!"

"*How*?"

"Well, different."

"How was it different?"

"Well, there was a newness. I got excited…"

Marge sat up in bed and screamed. Then she stopped.

"And when you kiss me it's not exciting, is that it?"

"We're used to each other."

"But that's what *love* is: living and growing together."

"O.K."

"'O.K.'? What do you mean—'O.K.'?"

"I mean, you're right."

"You don't say it like you mean it. You just don't want to talk. You've lived with me all these years. Do you know why?"

"I'm not sure. People just settle into things, like jobs. People just settle into things. It happens."

"You mean being with me is like a job? Is it like a job now?"

"You punch a time clock on a job."

"There you go again! This is a serious discussion!"

"All right."

"'All right'? You loathsome ass! You're about to fall asleep!"

"Margy, what do you want me to do? That happened years ago!"

"All right, I'll tell you what I want you to do! I want you to kiss *me* like you did Lilly! I want you to *fuck* me like you did Lilly!"

"I can't do that…"

"Why? Because I don't excite you like Lilly did? Because I'm not *new*?"

"I hardly remember Lilly."

"You must remember *enough*. All right, you don't have to *fuck* me! Just *kiss* me like you did Lilly!"

"Oh my god, Margy, *please* let off, I beg you!"

"I want to know *why* we've lived all these years together! Have I wasted my life?"

"Everybody does, almost everybody does."

"Waste their lives?"

"I think so."

"If you could only *guess* how much I hate you!"

"Do you want a divorce?"

"Do I want a divorce? Oh my god, how *calm* you are! You ruin my whole god damned life and then ask me if I want a divorce! I'm 50 years old! I've given you my life! Where do I go from here?"

"You can go to hell! I'm tired of your voice. I'm tired of your bitching."

"Suppose I had done that with a man?"

"I wish you had. I wish you would!"

Theodore closed his eyes. Margaret sobbed. Outside a dog barked. Somebody tried to start a car. It wouldn't start. It was 65 degrees in a small town in Illinois. James Carter was president of the United States.

Theodore began to snore. Margaret went to the bottom drawer of the dresser and got the gun out. A .22 revolver. It was loaded. She got back into bed with her husband.

Margaret shook him. "Ted, darling, you're *snoring*…"

She shook him again.

"What is it…?" Ted asked.

She took the safety off the gun and put the gun to the part of his chest nearest her and pulled the trigger. The bed jolted and she pulled the gun away. A sound much like a fart came out of Theodore's mouth. He didn't seem to be in pain. The moon shone through the window. She looked and the hole was small and there wasn't much blood. Margaret moved the gun to the other side of Theodore's chest. She pulled the trigger again.

This time he made no sound at all. But he continued to breathe. She watched him. The blood was coming. The blood stank terribly.

Now that he was dying she almost loved him. But Lilly, when she thought about Lilly…Ted's mouth on hers, and all the rest, then she wanted to shoot him again…Ted had always looked good in a turtleneck and he looked good in green, and when he farted in bed he always first turned away—he never farted against her. He seldom missed a day at work. He'd miss tomorrow…

Margaret sobbed for a while and then went to sleep.

When Theodore awakened he felt as if there were long sharp reeds stuck into each side of his chest. He felt no pain. He put his hands on his chest and then lifted them in the moonlight. His hands were covered with blood. It confused him. He looked at Margaret. She was asleep and in her hand was the gun he had taught her to use for her own protection.

He sat up and the blood began exiting more quickly from the two holes in his chest. Margaret had shot him while he had been asleep. For fucking Lilly. He hadn't even been able to climax with Lilly.

He thought, I'm almost dead but if I can get away from her I might have a chance.

Theodore gently reached over and unclasped Margaret's fingers from the gun. The safety catch was still off.

I don't want to kill you, he thought, I just want to get away. I think I've wanted to get away for at least 15 years.

He managed to get out of bed. He took the gun and pointed it at Margaret's upper thigh, right leg. He fired.

Margy screamed and he put his hand over her mouth. He waited some minutes and then took his hand away.

"What are you *doing*, Theodore?"

He pointed the gun at Margaret's upper thigh, left leg. He fired. He stopped her new scream by putting his hand over her mouth again. He held it there some minutes, then took it away.

“You kissed Lilly,” Margaret said.

There were two bullets left in the gun. Ted straightened and looked at the holes in his chest. The hole on the right side had stopped bleeding. The hole on the left side spurted a thin needle-like line of red at regular intervals.

“I’ll *kill* you!” Margy told him from the bed.

“You *really* want to, don’t you?”

“Yes, *yes*! And I *will*!”

Ted began to feel dizzy and sick. Where were the cops? Surely they had heard all the gunshots? Where *were* they? Couldn’t anybody hear gunfire?

He saw the window. He fired at the window. He was getting weaker. He fell to his knees. He moved on his knees toward another window. He fired again. The bullet made a round hole in the glass but it didn’t shatter. A black shadow passed in front of him. Then it was gone.

He thought, I’ve got to get this gun out of here!

Theodore gathered the last of his strength. He threw the gun against the window pane. The glass broke but the gun fell back inside of the house…

As he became conscious his wife was standing over him. She was actually *standing* on the two legs he had shot. She was reloading the gun.

“I’m going to kill you,” she said.

“Margy, for Christ’s sake, listen! I *love* you!”

“*Crawl*, you lying dog!”

“Margy, please….”

Theodore began to crawl toward another bedroom.

She followed him. “So, it *excited* you to kiss Lilly?”

“No, no! I didn’t like it! I hated it!”

“I’ll blow those damned kissing lips right off your mouth!”

“Margy, my god!”

She put the gun to his mouth.

“Here’s a *kiss* for you!”

She fired. The bullet blew away part of his lower lip and part of his jaw bone. He remained conscious. He saw one of his shoes on the floor. He gathered his strength again and threw the shoe at another window. The glass broke and the shoe fell outside.

Margaret took the gun and pointed it to her breast. She pulled the trigger…

When the police broke down the door Margaret was standing and holding the gun.

“All right, madam, drop the gun!” said one of the cops.

Theodore was still trying to crawl away. Margaret aimed the gun at him, fired and missed. Then she dropped to the floor in her purple nightgown.

“What the hell happened?” one of the cops asked, bending over Theodore.

Theodore turned his head. His mouth was a blob of red.

“Skirrr,” said Theodore, “skirrr…”

“I hate these domestic quarrels,” the other cop said. “Real *messy*…”

“Yeah,” said the first cop.

“I had a fight with my wife just this morning. You can never tell.”

“Skirrr,” said Theodore…

Lilly was at home looking at an old Marlon Brando movie on television. She was alone. She’d always been in love with Marlon.

She farted gently. She lifted her robe and began to play with herself.

HOT LADY

Monk walked in. It seemed very dusty in there and dimmer than in the usual places. He walked toward the far end of the bar and sat down next to a big blonde who was smoking a cigarillo and drinking a Hamm's. She farted as Monk sat down. "Good evening," he said, "my name's Monk." "My name's Mud," she said, which immediately dated her.

As Monk sat there a skeleton rose from behind the bar where it had been sitting on a stool. The skeleton walked over to Monk. Monk ordered a scotch on the rocks and the skeleton reached out with its hands and began to make the drink. It spilled a goodly bit of scotch on the bar but it did manage the drink and it did pick up Monk's money, put it in the register and bring back the correct change.

"What's the matter?" Monk asked the lady, "can't they afford union help around here?"

"Ah fuck," said the lady, "that's Billy's trick. Can't you see the fucking wires? He operates that thing with wires. He thinks it's very funny."

"This place is strange," said Monk. "It stinks of death."

"Death doesn't stink," said the lady, "only the living stink, only the dying stink, only the decaying stink. Death doesn't stink."

A spider dropped down on an invisible thread between them and slowly spun around. It was golden in the dim light. Then it ran back up its thread and was gone.

"First spider I ever saw in a bar," said Monk.

"It lives on bar flies," said the lady.

"Christ, this place is full of bad jokes."

The lady farted. “A kiss for you,” she said.

“Thank you,” said Monk.

A drunk at the other end of the bar put some money in the jukebox and the skeleton came out from behind the bar and walked up to the lady and bowed. The lady got up and danced with the skeleton. They danced around and around. The only people that could be seen in the bar were the lady, the skeleton, the drunk and Monk. It was a slow night. Monk lit a Pall Mall and worked on his drink. The piece ended and the skeleton went back behind the bar and the lady came back and sat down beside Monk.

“I remember,” said the lady, “when all the celebrities came in here. Bing Crosby, Amos and Andy, the Three Stooges. This place really used to swing.”

“I like it better this way,” said Monk.

The jukebox started again. “Care to dance?” asked the lady.

“Why not?” said Monk.

They got up and began dancing. The lady wore lavender and smelled of lilacs. But she was quite fat and her skin was orange in color and her false teeth seemed to chew quietly on a dead mouse.

“This place reminds me of Herbert Hoover,” said Monk.

“Hoover was a great man,” said the lady.

“Like hell,” said Monk. “If Franky D. hadn’t come along we all would have starved to death.

“Franky D. got us into the war,” said the lady.

“Well,” said Monk, “he had to protect us from the fascist hordes.”

“Don’t tell me about the fascist hordes,” said the lady. “My brother died fighting Franco in Spain.”

“Abraham Lincoln Brigade?” asked Monk.

“Abraham Lincoln Brigade,” said the lady.

They were dancing very close and the lady suddenly stuck her tongue into Monk’s mouth. He pushed it back out with his tongue. She tasted like old postage stamps and the dead mouse. The song ended. They walked over and sat down.

The skeleton walked over to them. It had a vodka and orange in one hand. It stood in front of Monk and threw the vodka and orange into his face, then walked off.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Monk.

"It's very jealous," said the lady. "It saw me kiss you."

"You call that a kiss?"

"I've kissed some of the greatest men of all time."

"I imagine you have—like Napoleon, Henry VIII and Caesar."

The lady farted. "A kiss for you," she said.

"Thank you," said Monk.

"I guess I am getting old," said the lady. "You know we talk about prejudices but we never talk about the prejudice everyone has against the old."

"Yeah," said Monk.

"I'm not *really* old, though," said the lady.

"No," said Monk.

"I still get monthlies," said the lady.

Monk waved the skeleton over for two more drinks. The lady switched to scotch on the rocks. They both had scotch on rocks. The skeleton walked back and sat down.

"You know," said the lady, "I was there when the Babe had two strikes on him and he pointed to the wall and on the next pitch he hit the ball right over the wall."

"I thought that was a myth," said Monk.

"Myth, shit," said the lady, "I was there. I saw it happen."

"You know," said Monk, "that's wonderful. You know it's exceptional people who make the world go round. They kind of work the miracles for us, while we sit around on our fannies."

"Yeah," said the lady.

They sat and nipped at their drinks. Outside you could hear the traffic going up and down Hollywood Boulevard. The sound was persistent, like the tide, like waves, almost like an ocean, and it was an ocean: there were sharks out there and barracuda and jellyfish and octopi and suckerfish and whales and mollusks and sponges and grunion and the like. Inside, it was more like a separate fishtank.

"I was there," said the lady, "when Dempsey almost murdered Willard. Jack was just off the boxcars and mean as a starved tiger. You never saw anything like it before or since."

"You say you still have monthlies?"

"That's right," said the lady.

"They say Dempsey had cement or plaster in his gloves, they say he soaked them in water and let them harden, that's why he busted up Willard like he did," said Monk.

"That's a fucking untruth," said the lady. "I was there, I saw those gloves."

"I think you're crazy," said Monk.

"They thought Joan of Arc was crazy too," said the lady.

"I suppose you saw Joan of Arc get burned," said Monk.

"I was there," said the lady. "I saw it."

"Bullshit."

"She burned. I saw her burn. It was so horrible and beautiful."

"What was beautiful about it?"

"The way she burned. It started at her feet. It was like a nest of red snakes and they crawled up her legs and then it was like a blazing red curtain and she had her face turned up and you could smell the flesh burning and she was still alive but she never screamed. Her lips were moving and she was praying but she never screamed."

"Bullshit," said Monk, "anybody would scream."

"No," said the lady, "not anybody would scream. People are different."

"Flesh is flesh, and pain is pain," said Monk.

"You underestimate the human spirit," said the lady.

"Yeah," said Monk.

The lady opened her purse. "Here, I wanna show you something." She took out a matchbook, struck a match and held the palm of her left hand out. She held the match underneath her palm and let it burn until the match went out. There was the sweet smell of burnt flesh.

"That's pretty good," said Monk, "but it's not the entire body."

"It doesn't matter," said the lady. "The principle's the same."

"No," said Monk, "it's not the same thing."

"Balls," said the lady. She stood up and put a match to the hem of her lavender dress. The material was thin and gauze-like and the flames began to lick around her legs and then began to crawl up toward her waist.

"Jesus Christ," said Monk. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Proving a principle," said the lady.

The flames rose higher. Monk leaped off his stool and tackled the lady. He rolled her over and over on the floor and beat at her dress with his hands. Then the fire was out. The lady got back on her barstool and sat there. Monk sat down beside her, shaking. The bartender walked up. He was dressed in a clean white shirt, black vest, bow tie, striped blue and white pants.

"I'm sorry, Maude," he said to the lady, "but you gotta go. You've had enough for tonight."

"O.K., Billy," said the lady, and she finished her drink, got up and walked out the door. Before she did she said goodnight to the drunk at the other end of the bar.

"My god," said Monk, "she's too god damned much."

"Did she pull her Joan of Arc act again?" asked the bartender.

"Hell, you saw it, didn't you?"

"No, I was talking to Louie," he pointed to the drunk at the end of the bar.

"I thought you were upstairs working those wires."

"What wires?"

"The wires on the skeleton."

"What skeleton?" asked the bartender.

"Now come on," said Monk, "don't give me any shit."

"What are you talking about?"

"There was a skeleton in here serving drinks. He even danced with Maude."

"I've been here all night, stranger," said the bartender.

"I said, '*Don't give me any shit*!'"

"I'm not giving you any shit," said the bartender. He turned to the drunk at the end of the bar. "Hey, Louie, you seen a skeleton in here?"

“A skeleton?” asked Louie. “What are you talking about?”

“You tell this man that I’ve been right here behind the bar all night,” said the bartender.

“Billy’s been here all night, stranger. And neither of us has seen a skeleton.”

“Give me another scotch on the rocks,” said Monk. “Then I’ve got to get out of here.”

The bartender brought the scotch on rocks. Monk drank it and then he got out of there.

IT’S A DIRTY WORLD

I drove along Sunset, late one evening, stopped for a signal, and at a bus stop saw this dyed redhead with a brutal and ravaged face, powdered, painted, that said “this is what life does to us.” I could imagine her drunk, screaming across the room at some man and I was glad the man wasn’t me. She saw me looking at her and waved, “Hey, how about a ride?” “O.K.,” I said, and she ran across two lanes of traffic to get in. We drove along and she showed me a bit of leg. Not too bad. I drove not saying anything. “I want to go to Alvarado Street,” she said. I figured as much. That’s where they hung out. From Eighth and Alvarado on up, the bars across the park and around the corners, all the way up to where the hill began. I’d sat in those bars for quite a few years and knew the action. Most of the girls just wanted a drink and a place to stay. In those dark bars they didn’t look too bad. We approached Alvarado. “Can I have 50 cents?” she asked. I reached in and got two quarters. “I ought to be able to cop a feel for that.” She laughed. “Go ahead.” I pulled her dress back and pinched her gently right where the stocking ended. I almost said, “Shit, let’s get a fifth and go to my place.” I could see myself stabbing that thin body, I could almost hear the springs. Then I could see her later sitting in a chair, cursing and talking and laughing. I passed. She got out at Alvarado and I watched her walking across the street, trying to shake it like she had something. I drove on. I owed the state $606 income tax. I’d have to skip a piece of ass now and then.

I parked outside the Chinaman’s and went in and got a bowl of chicken won ton. The guy sitting to my right had his left ear missing. There was just a hole in his head, a dirty hole with a lot of hair around it. No ear at all. I looked into the hole and then went back to the chicken won ton. It didn't taste as good. Then another guy came in and sat on my left. He was a bum. He ordered a cup of coffee. He looked at me, "Hello, Wino," he said.

"Hello," I answered.

"Everybody calls *me* 'Wino,' so I thought I'd call you one."

"That's all right. I used to be one."

He stirred his coffee. "Those little bubbles on top of the coffee. There. Mother used to say that meant money was coming my way. It didn't work out that way."

Mother? This man once had a mother?

I finished my bowl and left them there, the guy without an ear and the bum looking at the bubbles in his coffee.

This is turning out to be a hell of a night, I thought. Guess not much more can happen. I was wrong.

I decided to walk across Alameda to buy some stamps. The traffic was heavy and they had a young cop directing traffic. There was some action going on. A young man in front of me kept hollering at the cop. "Come on, let us across, what the hell! We've been standing here long enough!" The cop kept waving the traffic through. "Come on, what the hell's wrong with you?" the kid yelled. This kid's gotta be nuts, I thought. He was nice looking, young, big, around six-three, two hundred pounds. White t-shirt. Nose a little too big. He might have had a few beers but he wasn't drunk. Then the cop blew his whistle and motioned for the crowd to cross. The kid stepped into the street. "All right, come on everybody, it's *safe* now, it's *safe* to cross!" That's what you think, kid, was my thought. The kid was waving his arms. "Come on, everybody!" I was walking right behind him. I saw the cop's face. It got very white. I saw the eyes narrow to slits. He was a short, heavyset, young cop. He moved toward the kid. Oh jesus, here it comes. The kid saw the cop moving toward him. "Don't you TOUCH me! Don't you dare TOUCH me!" The cop grabbed him by the right arm, said something to him, tried to guide the kid back to the curbing.

The kid broke the grip and walked off. The cop ran up behind him, got a hammer-lock on the kid. The kid broke out of that and then they were scuffling, whirling around. You could hear their feet in the street. People stood and watched from a distance. I was right on top of them. Several times I had to step back as they scuffled. I didn't have any god damned sense either. Then they were up on the sidewalk. The cop's hat flew off. That's when I got a bit jumpy. The cop didn't look much like a cop without his cap, but he still had his club and his gun. The kid broke away again and started to run off. The cop leaped on him from behind, got an arm around his neck and tried to pull him over backwards, but the kid just stood there. And then he broke free. Finally the cop had him pinned against an iron guardrail outside a Standard Station parking lot. A white kid and a white cop. I looked across the street and saw five young blacks grinning and watching. They were lined up against a wall. The cop had his cap back on and was leading the kid down the street to a call box.

I went in and got my stamps out of the machine. It was a screwy night. I almost expected a snake to drop out of there. But I just got stamps. I looked up and saw my friend Benny. "Did you catch the action, Benny?"

"Yeah, when they get him to the station they'll put on leather gloves and beat hell out of him."

"You think so?"

"Sure. The city's just like the county. They beat hell out of them. I just got out of the new county jail. They let the new cops work out on the prisoners there to get experience. You could hear them screaming as the cops beat them. They brag about it. While I was in, one cop walked past and said, 'I just beat hell out of a wino!'"

"I've heard about it."

"They allow you one phone call and this guy was on the phone too long and they kept telling him to get off. He kept saying, 'just a minute, just a minute!' and finally one cop got pissed and hung the phone up and the guy screamed, ‘I’ve got my rights, you can’t do that!’”

“What happened?”

“About four cops grabbed the guy. They took him so fast that his feet didn’t even touch the ground. They took him in the next room. You could hear him, they worked him over good. You know, they had us there, bending over, looking up our asses, looking in our shoes for dope, and they brought the kid out naked and he was bent over and trembling, shivering. You could see red welts all over his body. They just left him there, trembling against that wall. He had really had it.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I was driving past the Union Rescue Mission one night and two cops in a squad car were picking up a drunk. A cop got in the back seat with the drunk and I heard the drunk say ‘you dirty motherfucking cop!’ and I saw the cop take his club and jam the end of it, hard, right into the guy’s stomach. It was a hell of a blow and made me a little sick. It could have broken the stomach open or caused internal bleeding.”

“Yeah, it’s a dirty world.”

“You said it, Benny. See you around. Watch yourself.”

“Sure. You too.”

I found the car and drove on back up Sunset. When I got to Alvarado I turned south and drove down nearly to Eighth Street. I parked, got out, found a liquor store and bought a fifth of whiskey. Then I walked into the nearest bar. There she was. My redhead with the brutal face. I walked up, patted the fifth. “Let’s go.” She finished the drink and walked out behind me. “Nice evening,” she said. “Oh, yeah,” I answered.

When we got to my place she went to the bathroom and I rinsed out two glasses. There’s no way out, I thought, there’s no way out of anything.

She came into the kitchen, put herself up against me. She had put on fresh lipstick. She kissed me, working her tongue around in my mouth. I lifted her dress and got a handful of panty. We stood under the electric light, locked. Well, the state would have to wait a little longer for their income tax. Maybe

Governor Deukmejian would understand. We broke, I poured two drinks and we walked into the other room.

900 POUNDS

Eric Knowles awakened in the motel room and looked around. There were Louie and Gloria wrapped around each other on the other half of the king-size bed. Eric found a warm bottle of beer, opened it, took it into the bathroom and drank it while under the shower. He was damned sick. He'd heard about the warm beer theory from experts. It didn't work. He stepped out of the shower and vomited into the toilet. Then he stepped back into the shower. That was the trouble with being a writer, that was the main trouble—leisure time, excessive leisure time. You had to wait around for the buildup until you could write and while you were waiting you went crazy, and while you were going crazy you drank and the more you drank the crazier you got. There was nothing glorious about the life of a writer or the life of a drinker. Eric toweled off, got into his shorts and walked into the other room. Louie and Gloria were awakening.

"Oh, shit," said Louie, "my god."

Louie was another writer. He didn't pay the rent with it like Eric did, Gloria paid Louie's rent. Three-fourths of the writers Eric knew in Los Angeles and Hollywood were supported by women; those writers were not as talented with the typewriter as they were with their women. They sold themselves to their women spiritually and physically.

He heard Louie in the bathroom vomiting and hearing it started Eric going again. He found an empty paper bag and each time Louie heaved Eric heaved. It was some close harmony.

Gloria was rather nice. She had just hooked on as an assistant professor at a northern California college. She stretched out on the bed and said, “You guys are something else. The vomit twins.”

Louie stepped out of the bathroom. “Hey, are you makng fun of me?”

“No way, kiddo. It was just a hard night for me.”

“It was a hard night for all of us.”

“I think I’ll try the warm beer cure again,” said Eric. He twisted the top off a bottle and tried it again.

“That was something, the way you subdued her,” said Louie.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, when she came at you over the top of the coffee table, you did it all in slow motion. You weren’t excited at all. You just got her by one of her arms, then the other, and rolled her over. Then you got on top of her and said, ‘What the hell’s the matter with you?’”

“This beer is working,” said Eric. “You ought to try it.”

Louie twisted the top off a bottle and sat down on the edge of the bed. Louie edited a little magazine, *Riot of the Rats*. It was a mimeo. As a little magazine it was no better or worse than the rest of them. They all got very tiresome; the talent was thin and inconsistent. Louie was now on his 15th or 16th issue.

“It was her house,” said Louie, thinking about the night before. “She said it was her house and for us all to get out of there.”

“Diverging viewpoints and ideals. They always cause trouble and there are always diverging viewpoints and ideals. Besides, it *was* her house,” said Eric.

“I think I’ll try one of those beers,” said Gloria. She got up and got into her dress and found a warm beer. Nice looking professor, thought Eric.

They sat there trying to force the beers down.

“Anybody for television?” asked Louie.

“Don’t you dare,” said Gloria.

Suddenly there was an enormous explosion, it shook the walls.

"Jesus!" said Eric.

"What was that?" asked Gloria.

Louie walked to the door and opened it. They were on the second floor. There was a balcony and the motel was built around a swimming pool. Louie looked down. "You're not going to believe this but there's a five hundred pound guy down there in the swimming pool. That explosion you heard was when he jumped into the water. I never saw a guy so big. He's enormous. And he's got someone with him, weighs about four hundred pounds. Looks like his son. Now the son is going to jump in. Hold on!"

There was another explosion. The walls shook again. Fountains of water leaped out of the pool.

"Now they're swimming side by side. What a sight!"

Eric and Gloria walked to the door and looked out.

"This is a dangerous situation," said Eric.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, looking down at all that fat we're apt to holler something at them. All very childish, you know. But hungover like this anything can happen."

"Yeah, I can just see them running up here and pounding on the door," said Louie. "How are we going to handle nine hundred pounds?"

"No way, even in good health."

"In bad health, no chance at all."

"Right."

"HEY FAT BOY!" Louie yelled down.

"Oh, no," said Eric, "oh no, please. I'm sick…"

Both of the fat men looked up from the swimming pool. They were both wearing light blue trunks.

"*Hey, fat boy*!" yelled Louie. "*I bet if you farted, you'd blow seaweed from here to Bermuda*!"

"Louie," said Eric, "there's no seaweed down there."

"*There's no seaweed down there, fat boy*!" yelled Louie. "*You must have sucked it up your ass*!"

"Oh, my god," said Eric, "I'm a writer because I'm a coward and now I face sudden and violent death."

The biggest fat man climbed out of the pool and the smaller one followed him. They could hear them coming up the stairway, plop, plop, plop. The walls shook.

Louie shut the door and hooked the chain.

"What has any of this got to do with a decent and abiding literature?" asked Eric.

"Nothing, I guess," answered Louie.

"You and your fucking little mimeo machine," said Eric.

"I'm scared," said Gloria.

"We're all scared," said Louie.

Then they were at the door. BAM, BAM, BAM, BAM!

"Yeah?" answered Louie. "What is it?"

"*Open the fucking door*!"

"There's nobody in here," said Eric.

"*I'll teach you bastards*!"

"Oh, please *do* teach me, sir!" said Eric.

"Now what did you say that for?" asked Gloria.

"Damn," said Eric, "I'm just trying to agree with him."

"*Open up or I'm coming through*!"

"We might as well make you work for it," said Louie. "Let's see what you can do."

They heard the sound of flesh straining against the door. They could see the door bend and give.

"You and your fucking mimeo machine," said Eric.

"It was a good machine."

"Help me brace this door," said Eric.

They stood bracing the door against the massive weight. The door weakened. Then they heard another voice. "*Hey, what the hell's going on up there*?"

"*I'm going to teach these punks a lesson, that's what's going on*!"

"*You break that door and I'm going to call the police*!"

"*What*?"

There was one more lunge, then it was quiet. Except for the voices.

"I'm on parole for assault and battery. Maybe I better go easy here."

"Yeah, cool off, you don't want to hurt nobody."

"But they spoiled my swim."

"There are things more important than swimming, man."

"Yeah, like eating," said Louie through the door.

BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM!

"What do you want?" asked Eric.

"*Listen you guys! If I hear one more sound out of you, just one sound, I'm coming in*!"

Eric and Louie were silent. They could hear the two fat men going down the stairway.

"I think we could have taken them," said Eric. "Fat guys can't move. They're easy."

"Yeah," said Louie, "I think we could have taken them. I mean, if we had really wanted to."

"We're out of beer," said Gloria, "I sure could use a cold beer. My nerves are completely shot."

"O.K., Louie," said Eric, "you go out and get the beers, I'll pay for them."

"No," said Louie, "you go get them. I'll pay."

"I'll pay," said Eric, "and we'll send Gloria."

"O.K." said Louie.

Eric gave Gloria the money and the instructions and they opened the door and let her out. The swimming pool was empty. It was a nice California morning, smoggy, stale and listless.

"You and your fucking mimeo machine," said Eric.

"It's a good magazine," said Louie, "it's as good as most."

"I suppose you're right."

Then they stood and sat and sat and stood waiting for Gloria to get back with the cold beer.

DECLINE AND FALL

It was a Monday afternoon in The Hungry Diamond. There were only two people in there, Mel and the bartender. Monday afternoon in Los Angeles is nowhere—even Friday night is nowhere—but especially Monday afternoon. The bartender, whose name was Carl, was drinking from under the bar and standing near Mel, who was humped leisurely over a stale green beer. “I gotta tell you something,” said Mel. “Go ahead,” said the bartender.

“Well, I got this phone call the other night from a guy I used to work with in Akron. He lost his job drinking and he married a nurse and this nurse supports him. I don’t have much feeling for these people—but you know how people are, they kind of hang on to you.”

“Yeah,” said the bartender.

“Anyhow, they phone me—listen, give me another beer, this shit tastes awful.”

“Okay, just drink it a little faster; it begins to lose body after an hour.”

“All right…They tell me they’ve solved the meat shortage—I think ‘What meat shortage?’—and to come on over. I’ve got nothing to do so I go over. The Rams are playing and this guy, Al, he turns on the tv and we watch. Erica, her name is, she’s in the kitchen mixing a salad and I’ve brought a couple of six-packs. I say hello, Al opens a few bottles, it’s nice and warm in there, the oven’s on.

“Well, it’s comfortable. They look like they haven’t had an argument in a couple of days and the state of affairs is calm. Al says something about Reagan and something about unemployment but I can't respond; it all bores me. You see, I don't give a damn if the country is rotten or not, so long as I make it."

"Right," said the bartender, taking a drink from under the bar.

"All right. She comes out and sits and drinks her beer. Erica. The nurse. She says that all the doctors treat their patients like cattle. She says that all the damned doctors are on the make. They think their own shit doesn't stink. She'd rather have Al than any doctor alive. Now that's a silly statement, isn't it?"

"I never met Al," said the barkeep.

"So we're playing cards and the Rams are losing and after a few hands Al says to me, 'You know, I got a strange wife. She likes to have somebody watch while we do the thing.' 'That's right,' she says, 'that's what really stimulates me.' And Al says, 'But it's so hard to get somebody to watch. You'd think it would be easy to get somebody to watch, but it's hard as hell.'

"I don't say anything. I ask for two cards and raise a nickel. She lays down her cards and Al lays down his cards and they both stand up. She starts to move back across the room and Al follows her. 'You whore,' he says, 'you god-damned whore!' Here's this guy calling his wife a whore. 'You whore!' he screams. He corners her in one corner of the room and slaps her, rips her blouse off. 'You whore!' he screams again, and slaps her and knocks her down. Her skirt is torn and she kicks her legs and screams.

"He picks her up and kisses her, then throws her on the couch. He's all over her, kissing her and ripping at her clothes. Then he's got her panties off and he's at work. While he's doing this she's looking out from underneath to see if I'm watching. She sees that I'm watching and she starts squirming like a mad snake. They really go to it, finish it off; she gets up and goes to the bathroom and Al goes into the kitchen for more beers. 'Thanks,' he says when he comes out, 'you were a big help.'"

"Then what happened?" asked the barkeep.

"Well, then the Rams finally scored, and there was a lot of noise on the tv, and she comes out of the bathroom and goes into the kitchen.

"Al starts in on Reagan again. He says it is the beginning of the Decline and Fall of the West, just like Spengler said. Everybody is so greedy and decadent, the decay has really set in. He goes along that line for some time.

"Then Erica calls us into the breakfast nook where the table is all set and we sit down. It smells good—a roast. There are slices of pineapple on top of it. It looks like an upper shank; I can see what almost looks like a knee. 'Al,' I say, 'that thing really looks like a human leg from the knee up.' 'That,' says Al, 'is exactly what it is.'"

"He said that?" asked the barkeep, taking a drink from under the bar.

"Yeah," answered Mel, "and when you hear something like that you don't know exactly what to think. What would *you* think?"

"I'd think," said the barkeep, "that he was joking."

"Of course. So I said, 'Great, cut me a nice slice.' And Al did. There was mashed potatoes and gravy, corn, heated bread and the salad. There were stuffed olives in the salad. Al said, 'Try a little of that hot mustard on that meat, it goes good.' So I put some on. The meat wasn't bad.

"'Listen Al,' I said, 'this isn't really bad. What is it?' 'It's like I told you, Mel,' he answers, 'it's a human leg, the upper flank. It's a 14-year-old boy we found hitchhiking on Hollywood Boulevard. We took him in and fed him and he watched Erica and me do the thing for three or four days and then we got tired of doing that, so we slaughtered him, cleaned out the innards, ran that down the garbage disposal and dropped him into the freezer. It's a hell of a lot better than chicken, though actually I don't prefer it to porterhouse.'"

"He said that?" asked the barkeep, reaching for another drink under the bar.

"He said that," answered Mel. "Give me another beer."

The barkeep gave Mel another beer. Mel said, "Well, I still thought that he was joking, you know, so I said, 'All right, let me see your freezer.' And Al says, 'Sure—over here.' And he pulls back the lid and there's the torso in there, a leg and a half, two arms and the head. It's chopped up like that. It looks very sanitary, but it still doesn't look so good to me. The head is looking up at us and the eyes are open and blue, and the tongue is sticking out of the head—it's frozen to the lower lip.

"'Jesus Christ, Al,' I say to him, 'you're a killer—this is unbelievable, this is sickening!'

"'Grow up,' he says, 'they kill people by the millions in wars and give out medals for it. Half the people in this world are gonna starve to death while we sit around and watch it on tv.'

"I tell you, Carl, those kitchen walls began to spin, I kept seeing that head, those arms, that chopped-up leg…There's something so quiet about a murdered thing, somehow you get to thinking a murdered thing should keep screaming, I don't know.

"Anyhow, I walked over to the kitchen sink and began vomiting. I vomited for a long time. Then I told Al that I had to get out of there. Wouldn't you want to get out of there, Carl?"

"Fast," said Carl. "Very fast."

"Well, Al got in front of the door and he said, 'Listen—that wasn't murder. Nothing's murder. All you've got to do is break through the ideas they've loaded on us and you're a free man—*free*, you understand?'

"'Get the hell away from that door, Al—I'm getting out of here!'

"He grabs me by the shirt and starts to rip my shirt. I hit him in the face but he keeps ripping at my shirt. I hit him again and again, but he doesn't seem to feel anything. The Rams are still on tv. I step back from the door and then his wife runs up, she grabs me and starts to kiss me. I don't know what to do. She's a powerfully built woman. She knows all these nurses' tricks. I try to push her off but can't. Her mouth is on mine, she's as crazy as he is. I begin to get a hard-on, I can't help it. Her face isn't so great but she has these legs and this big ass and she has on the tightest dress possible. She tastes like boiled onions and her tongue is fat and full of saliva, but she's changed into this new dress—green—and as I pull the dress up I see her petticoat, blood-colored, and it really heats me up and I look over and Al has his cock out and watching.

"I threw her on the couch and soon we were at it, Al standing over us and breathing heavily. We all made it together, a real trio, then I got up and began getting my clothes straight. I went into the bathroom and threw water on my face, combed my hair and came out. When I did they were both sitting on the couch watching the football game. Al had a beer open for me and I sat down and drank it and smoked a cigarette. Then that was all.

"I got up and said I was going. They both said goodbye and Al told me to give them a call anytime. Then I was out of the apartment and into the street, and then I was in my car and driving away. And that was it."

"You didn't go to the police?" asked the barkeep.

"Well, you know, Carl, it's hard—they kind of adopted me into the family. It wasn't as if they were trying to hide anything from me."

"The way I look at it is that you're an accessory to a murder."

"But what I got to thinking, Carl, is that those people really didn't seem to be *bad* people. I've seen people I disliked a lot more who never killed anything. I don't know, it's really confusing. I even think of that guy in the freezer as some kind of big frozen rabbit…"

The barkeep pulled the Luger out from under the bar and pointed it at Mel.

"Okay," he said, "you just freeze while I call the police."

"Look, Carl—this thing isn't for you to decide."

"The *hell* it isn't! I'm a citizen! You assholes just can't go around popping people into freezers. I may be next!"

"Look, Carl, look at me! I want to tell you something…"

"Okay, go ahead."

“It was just bullshit.”

“You mean what you told me?”

“Yeah, it was just bullshit. One big joke. I sucked you in. Now put your gun away and pour us both a scotch and water.”

“That story wasn’t bullshit.”

“I just told you it was.”

“That was no bullshit story—there was too much detail. Nobody tells a story like that. That’s no joke. Nobody jokes that way.”

“I tell you it was *bullshit*, Carl.”

“There’s no way I can believe that.”

Carl reached over to his left to slide the phone down toward him. The phone had been sitting on the bar. When Carl reached to his left Mel grabbed the beer bottle and got Carl across the face with it. Carl dropped the gun and held his face and Mel jumped over the bar, hit him again—this time behind the ear—and Carl dropped. Mel picked up the Luger, aimed carefully, squeezed the trigger once, then put the gun in a brown paper bag, jumped back over the bar, walked out the entrance and he was on the boulevard. The parking meter read “expired” in front of his car, but there was no ticket. He got in and drove off.

HAVE YOU READ PIRANDELLO?

My girlfriend had suggested that I move out of her house, a very large house, nice and comfortable, with a backyard a block long, leaking pipes, and frogs and crickets and cats. Anyway, I was out, as one gets out of such situations—with honor, courage, and expectation. I placed an ad in one of the underground papers: Writer: needs place where the sound of a typewriter is more welcome than the laugh track on “I Love Lucy.” $100 a month o.k. Privacy a must.

I had a month to move while my girlfriend was in Colorado for her yearly family reunion. I lay around in bed and waited for the phone to ring. Finally it rang. It was a guy who wanted me to babysit his three children whenever the “creative urge” overcame either him or his wife. Free room and board, and I could write whenever the creative urge was not on them. I told him I would think about it. The phone rang again two hours later. “Well?” he asked. “No,” I said. “Well,” he said, “do you know a pregnant woman in trouble?” I told him I would try to find him one and hung up.

The next day the phone rang again. “I read your ad,” she said. “I teach yoga.” “Oh?” “Yes, I teach exercise and meditation.” “Oh?” “You’re a writer?” “Yes.” “What do you write about?” “Oh, god, I don’t know. Bad as it sounds: Life…I guess.” “That doesn’t sound bad. Does it include sex?” “Doesn’t life?” “Sometimes. Sometimes not.” “I see.” “What’s your name?” “Henry Chinaski.” “Have you ever been published?” “Yes.” “Well, I have a master bedroom you can have for $100. With a private entrance.” “Sounds good.” “Have you read Pirandello?” “Yes.”

"Have you read Swinburne?" "Everybody has." "Have you read Herman Hesse?" "Yes, but I'm not homosexual." "Do you hate homosexuals?" "No, but I don't love them." "What about blacks?" "What about blacks?" "What do you think of them?" "They're fine." "Are you prejudiced?" "Everybody is." "What do you think God is?" "White hair, a stringy beard and no pecker." "What do you think about love?" "I don't think about it." "You're a smart-ass. Here, I'll give you my address. Come out and see me."

I took down the address and lay around a couple more days watching the soaps in the morning and the spy thrillers at night, plus the boxing matches. The phone rang again. It was the lady.

"You didn't come." "I've been engrossed." "Are you in love?" "Yes, I'm writing my new novel." "Lots of sex?" "Some of the time." "Are you a good lover?" "Most men like to think they are. I'm probably good but not great." "Do you eat pussy?" "Yes." "Good." "Your room still available?" "Yes, the master bedroom. Do you really go down on a woman?" "Hell yes. But everybody does now. This is 1982 and I am 62 years old. You can get a man 30 years younger and he can do the same thing. Probably better." "You'd be surprised."

I walked over to the refrigerator and got a beer and a smoke. When I picked up the receiver she was still there. "What's your name?" I asked. She told me some fancy name which I promptly forgot.

"I've been reading your stuff," she said. "You're really a powerful writer. You have a lot of shit in you but you've got a way of working on people's emotions."

"You're right. I'm not great but I'm different."

"How do you go down on a woman?"

"Now wait…"

"No, tell me."

"Well, it's an art."

"Yes, it is."

"How do you begin?" "With a brush stroke, lightly." "Of course, of course. Then, after you begin?" "Yes, well, there are techniques…" "What techniques?" "The first touch usually dulls the sensitivity in that area so that you can't return to it with the same effectiveness." "What the hell do you mean?" "You know what I mean." "You're making me hot." "This is clinical." "This is sexual. You're making me hot." "I don't know what else to say." "What does a man do then?" "You let your own enjoyment guide your exploration. It's different each time." "What do you mean?" "I mean sometimes it's a bit gross, sometimes it's tender, whichever way you feel." "Tell me." "Well, everything ends up at the clit." "Say that word again." "What?" "Clit." "Clit, clit, clit…" "Do you suck it? Nibble it?" "Of course." "You're making me hot." "Sorry." "You can have the master bedroom. You like privacy?" "Like I told you." "Tell me about my clit." "All clits are different." "It's not private here right now. They're building a retaining wall. But they'll be through in a couple of days. You'll like it here."

I took her address down again, hung up and went to bed. The phone rang. I walked over and picked it up and took it back to bed with me. "What do you mean, all clits are different?" "I mean different in size and response to stimuli." "Did you ever find one you couldn't stimulate?" "Not yet." "Listen, why don't you just come see me now?" "I've got an old car. It won't make it up the canyon." "Take the freeway and park in the lot at the Hidden Hills turnoff. I'll meet you there." "O.K."

I hung up, got dressed and got into my car. I took the freeway to the Hidden Hills turnoff, found the parking lot and sat there and waited. Twenty minutes went by and then a fat lady in a green dress drove up. She was in a white 1982 Caddy. All her front teeth were capped. "Are you the one?" she asked.

"I'm the one."

"Jesus Christ. You don't look so hot."

"You don't look so hot either."

"All right. Come on."

I got out of my car and into hers. Her dress was very short. On the fat thigh nearest me was a small tattoo that looked like a messenger boy standing on top of a dog.

"I'm not paying you anything," she said.

"That's all right."

"You don't look like a writer."

"For that I'm thankful."

"In fact, you don't look like a guy who can do anything…"

"Many things I can't do."

"But you sure talk some shit on the phone. I was playing with myself. Were you playing with yourself?"

"No."

We drove in silence after that. I had two cigarettes left and smoked both of them. Then I turned on her radio and listened to the music. Her place had a long curving driveway and the garage doors opened automatically as we drove in. She unhitched her seatbelt and then suddenly flung her arms around me. Her mouth looked like an open bottle of red india ink. The tongue came out. We rolled back against the seat, trapped like that. Then it ended and we got out. "Come on," she said. I followed her up a path lined with rosebushes. "I'm not going to pay you anything," she said, "not a fucking thing." "That's all right," I said. She got her key out of her purse, unlocked the door and I followed her in.

STROKES TO NOWHERE

Meg and Tony got his wife to the airport. After Dolly was airborne they stopped in the airport bar for a drink. Meg had a whiskey and soda. Tony had a scotch and water.

“Your wife trusts you,” said Meg.

“Yeh,” said Tony.

“I wonder if I can trust you?”

“Don’t you like to be fucked?”

“That’s not the point.”

“What’s the point?”

“The point is that Dolly and I are friends.”

“*We* can be friends.”

“Not that way.”

“Be modern. It’s the modern age. People swing. They’re uninhibited. They fuck from the ceiling. They screw dogs, babies, chickens, fish…”

“I like to choose. I have to care.”

“That’s so damned corny. The caring is already built-in. Then if you cultivate the caring long enough the next thing you know you think it’s love.”

“O.K., what’s wrong with love, Tony?”

“Love is a form of prejudice. You love what you need, you love what makes you feel good, you love what is convenient. How can you say you love one person when there are ten thousand people in the world that you would love more if you ever met them? But you’ll never meet them.”

“All right, so we do the best we can.”

"Granted. But we must still realize that love is just the result of a chance encounter. Most people make too much of it. On these grounds a good fuck is not to be entirely scorned."

"But that's the result of a chance meeting too."

"You're damned right. Drink up. We'll have another."

"You've got a good line, Tony, but it's not going to work."

"Well," said Tony, nodding the bartender over, "I'm not going to grieve about that either…"

It was a Saturday evening and they went back to Tony's place and turned on the tv. There wasn't a hell of a lot on. They drank some Tuborg and talked over the sound of the set.

"You ever heard the one," asked Tony, "about horses being too smart to bet on people?"

"No."

"Well, anyhow, it's a saying. You're not going to believe this but I had a dream the other night. I was down in the stables and a horse came to get me and give me a workout. There was a monkey with his arms and legs around my neck and he smelled of cheap wine. It was 6 a.m. and the cold wind blew in from the San Gabriel mountains. What's more it was foggy. They worked me three furlongs in 52, handily. Then they hot-walked me for 30 minutes and walked me back to the barn. A horse came in and gave me two hardboiled eggs, grapefruit, toast and milk. Then I was in a race. The stands were packed with horses. It looked like a Saturday. I was in the fifth race. I came in first and paid $32.40. That was some dream, wasn't it?"

"I'll say," said Meg. She crossed her legs. She had on a miniskirt but no pantyhose. Her boots covered the calves of her legs. Her thighs were bare, and full. "That was some dream." She was 30. Lipstick ever so faintly glistened on her lips. Brunette, very dark, long hair. No powder, no perfume. Never fingerprinted. Born in the northern part of Maine. One hundred twenty pounds.

Tony got up and got two more bottles of beer. When he came back Meg said: "A strange dream, but many of them are. It's when strange things happen in life, it makes you wonder…"

"Like?"

"Like my brother Damion. He was always poking into books… mysticism, yoga, all that shit. Come into a room he'd be as apt to be standing on his head in his jockey shorts as anything else. He even managed a couple of trips east…India, somewhere else. Came back hollow-cheeked and half-crazy, weighing about 76 pounds. But he kept at it. He meets this guy Ram Da Beetle, or some similar name. Ram Da Beetle's got a big tent down near San Diego and he's charging these suckers $175 for a five-day seminar. The tent is pitched on a cliff overlooking the sea. This old girl the Beetle is sleeping with, she owns the land, she lets him use it. Damion claims Ram Da Beetle gave him the final revelation he needed. And it was a shocker. I'm living in this small apartment in Detroit and he shows up and works the shocker on me…"

Tony looked higher up Meg's legs and said, "Damion's shocker? What shocker?"

"O.K., you know, he just *appears*…" Meg picked up her Tuborg.

"He came to visit you?"

"You might say that. Let me put it to you simply: Damion can dematerialize his body."

"He can? Then what happens?"

"He appears someplace else."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"Long distances?"

"He came all the way from India to Detroit, to my apartment in Detroit."

"How long did it take?"

"I don't know. Ten seconds, maybe."

"Ten seconds…ummm."

They sat there looking at each other. Meg sat on the couch and Tony sat across from her.

"Listen, Meg, you really give me the hots. My wife would never know."

“No, Tony.”

“Where’s your brother now?”

“He took my apartment in Detroit. He works in a shoe factory.”

“Listen, why can’t he get into a bank vault, take the money and get on out of there? He can use his talents. Why work in a shoe factory?”

“He says such a talent can’t be used to further the purposes of evil.”

“I see. Listen, Meg, let’s forget your brother.”

Tony walked over and sat on the couch next to Meg.

“You know, Meg, what *is* evil, and what we are *taught* is evil, can be two very different things. Society teaches us that certain things are evil in order to keep us subservient.”

“Like robbing banks?”

“Like fucking without going through all the proper channels.”

Tony grabbed Meg and kissed her. She didn’t resist. He kissed her again. Her tongue slid into his mouth.

“I still don’t think we should do it, Tony.”

“You kiss like you want to.”

“I haven’t had a man for months, Tony. It’s hard to resist but Dolly and I are friends. I hate to do it to her.”

“You won’t be doing it to her, you’ll be doing it to me.”

“You know what I mean.” Tony kissed her again, this time a long full kiss. Their bodies pressed together.

“Let’s go to the bedroom, Meg.”

She followed him in. Tony began undressing, throwing his clothes over a chair. Meg went into the bathroom, which was just off the bedroom. She sat down and pissed with the door open.

“I don’t want to get pregnant and I don’t take the pill.”

“Don’t worry.”

“Don’t worry why?”

“I got my strings cut.”

“All you guys say that.”

“It’s true, I’m cut.”

Meg got up and flushed.

"Suppose you want a baby sometime?"

"I don't want a baby sometime."

"I think it's awful for a man to get his strings cut."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Meg, stop the moralizing and come to bed."

Meg walked into the room naked. "I mean, Tony, I kind of think of it as a crime against nature."

"How about abortion? Is that a crime against nature too?"

"Of course. It's murder."

"How about a rubber? How about masturbation?"

"Oh, Tony, it's not the same thing."

"Get into bed before we die of old age."

Meg got on in and Tony grabbed her. "Ah, you feel good. Kind of like rubber filled with air…"

"Where'd you get that thing, Tony? Dolly never told me about that thing…it's huge!"

"Why should she tell you?"

"You're right. Just put that damned thing into me!"

"Just wait now, just wait!"

"Come on, I want it!"

"How about Dolly? Do you think it will be the right thing to do?"

"She's grieving over her dying mother! She can't use it! I can use it!"

"All right! All right!"

Tony mounted her and put it in.

"That's it, Tony! Now move it, move it!"

Tony moved it. He moved it slowly and steadily like the arm of an oil pump. Flub, flub, flub, flub.

"Oh, you son of a bitch! Oh my god, you son of a bitch!"

"*All right now, Meg! Get out of that bed! You are committing a crime against native decency and trust*!"

Tony felt a hand on his shoulder and then he felt himself being pulled off. He rolled over and looked up. There was a man standing there in a green t-shirt and bluejeans.

"Listen, you," said Tony, "what the hell are you doing in my house?"

"It's Damion!" said Meg.

"*Clothe thyself, little sister! The shame still radiates from thy body*!"

"Look here, motherfucker," said Tony from where he lay on the bed.

Meg was in the bathroom dressing, "I'm sorry, Damion, I am sorry!"

"I see I arrived from Detroit just in time," said Damion. "Another few minutes and I would have been too late."

"Another ten seconds," said Tony.

"You might as well clothe yourself too, my man," said Damion looking down at Tony.

"Mother," said Tony, "I happen to *live* here. I don't know *who* let you in. But I figure if I want to lay here balls naked, I've got a right."

"Hurry, Meg," said Damion, "I will take you out of this nest of sin."

"Listen, mother," said Tony, getting up and slipping into his jocks, "your sister wanted it and I wanted it and that's two votes to one."

"Ta-ta," said Damion.

"Ta-ta, nothing," said Tony. "She was about to get her rocks off and I was about to get my rocks off and you come bursting in here and interfere with a decent democratic decision, stopping a good old-fashioned horse-fuck!"

"Pack your things, Meg. I'm taking you home immediately."

"Yes, Damion!"

"I got a good mind to bust you up, fuck-killer!"

"Please restrain yourself. I abhor violence!"

Tony swung. Damion was gone.

"Over here, Tony." Damion was standing over by the bathroom door. Tony rushed him. He vanished again.

"Over here, Tony." Damion was standing on top of the bed, shoes and all.

Tony rushed across the room, leaped, found nothing, flew over the bed and fell to the floor. He got up and looked around. "Damion! Oh, Damion, you cheap-ass, tinhorn, shoe-factory Superman, where are you? Oh, Damion! Here, Damion! Come to me, Damion!"

Tony felt the blow on the back of his neck. There was a flash of red and the faint sound of one trumpet playing. Then he fell forward on the rug.

It was the telephone that brought him to consciousness some time later. He managed to get to the night stand where the phone sat, lifted the receiver and slumped down on the bed.

"Tony?"

"Yes?"

"Is this Tony?"

"Yes."

"This is Dolly."

"Hey, Dolly, whatcha say, Dolly?"

"Don't be funny, Tony. Mother died."

"Mother?"

"Yes, my mother. Tonight."

"I'm sorry."

"I'll stay for the funeral. I'll be home after the funeral."

Tony hung up. He saw the morning paper on the floor. He picked it up and stretched out on the bed. The war in the Falklands was still on. Both sides charged violations of this and that. There was still firing. Wouldn't that god damned war ever end?

Tony got up and walked into the kitchen. He found some salami and liverwurst in the refrigerator. He made a salami and liverwurst sandwich with hot mustard, relish, onion and tomato. He found one bottle of Tuborg left. He drank the Tuborg and ate the salami and liverwurst sandwich at the breakfastnook table. Then he lit a cigarette and sat there thinking, well, maybe the old lady left a little money, that would be nice, that would be damned nice. A man deserved a little luck after a rough night like this.

SOME MOTHER

Eddie’s mother had horseteeth and I did too and I remember once we walked up a hill together on the way to the store and she said, “Henry, we both need braces for our teeth. We look awful!” I walked proudly up the hill with her and she had on a tight yellow print dress, flowered, and she had on high heels and she wiggled and her heels went *click, click, click* on the cement. I thought, I’m walking with Eddie’s mother and she’s walking with me and we’re walking up the hill together. That was all—I walked into the store to buy a loaf of bread for my parents and she purchased her things. That was all.

I liked to go to Eddie’s place. His mother always sat in a chair with a drink in her hand and she crossed her legs real high and you could see where the stockings ended and where the flesh began. I liked Eddie’s mother, she was a real lady. When I walked in she’d say, “Hi, Henry!” and smile and she wouldn’t pull her skirt down. Eddie’s father would say hello too. He was a big guy and he’d be sitting there with a drink in his hand too. Jobs weren’t easy to get in 1933 and besides, Eddie’s father couldn’t work. He’d been an aviator in World War I and had been shot down. He had wires in his arms instead of bone, and so he sat there and drank with Eddie’s mother. It was dark in there where they were drinking but Eddie’s mother laughed often.

Eddie and I made model airplanes, cheap balsa wood jobs. They wouldn’t fly, we just moved them through the air with our hands. Eddie had a Spad and I had a Fokker. We’d seen “Hell’s Angels” with Jean Harlow. I couldn’t see that Jean

Harlow was any sexier than Eddie's mother. Of course, I didn't talk about Eddie's mother to Eddie. Then I noticed that Eugene started coming over. Eugene was another guy with a Spad but I could talk about Eddie's mother to him. When we got the chance. We had some good dogfights—two Spads against a Fokker. I did the best I could but usually I got shot down. Whenever I got into a real bad spot I'd pull an Immelman. We read the old flying magazines, *Flying Aces* was best. I even wrote some letters to the editor which he answered. The Immelman, he wrote me, was almost impossible. The stress on the wings was just too great. But sometimes I had to use the Immelman, especially with a guy on my tail. It usually tore my wings off and I had to bail out.

When we got the chance away from Eddie we'd talk about Eddie's mother.

"Jesus, she's got *some* legs."

"And she doesn't mind showing them."

"Watch out, here comes Eddie."

Eddie had no idea we were talking about his mother that way. I was a little ashamed of it but I couldn't help it. I certainly didn't want him to think of my mother that way. Of course, my mother didn't look like that. Nobody else's mother looked like that. Maybe those horseteeth had something to do with it. I mean, you'd look and see the horseteeth and they were a bit yellow and then you'd look down and see those legs crossed high, one foot flicking and kicking. Yes, I had horseteeth too.

Well, Eugene and I kept going over there and having the dogfights and I'd do my Immelmans and my wings would get ripped off. Although we had another game and Eddie played that one too. We were stunt flyers and racers. We'd go out and take big chances but somehow we always made it back. Often we landed in our own front yards. We each had a house and we each had a wife and our wives would be waiting for us. We'd describe how our wives would be dressed. They didn't wear much. Eugene's wore the least. In fact, she had a dress with a big hole cut right into the front of it. She'd meet Eugene at the door that way. My wife wasn't quite that bold, but she didn't wear much either. We all made love all the time. We made love to our wives all the time. They just couldn't get enough. While we were out stunting and racing and risking our lives they'd be in those houses waiting and waiting for us. And they just loved us, they didn't love anybody else. Sometimes we'd try to forget about them and go back to the dogfights. It was like Eddie said: when we were talking about women all we did was lay on the grass and we didn't do anything else. The most we would do, Eddie would say, "Hey, I got one!" And then I'd roll off my belly and show him mine and then Eugene would show his. That's how most of our afternoons went. Eddie's mother and father would be in there drinking and once in a while we'd hear Eddie's mother laugh.

One day Eugene and I went over there and we hollered for Eddie and Eddie didn't come out. "Hey, Eddie, for Christ's sake, come on out!" Eddie didn't come out.

"Something's wrong in there," Eugene said, "I know there's something wrong in there."

"Maybe somebody got murdered."

"We'd better look in there."

"You think we should?"

"We'd better."

The screen door pulled open and we walked in. It was as dark as usual. Then we heard a single word: "*Shit*!"

Eddie's mother was lying on the bed in the bedroom and she was drunk. Her legs were up and her dress had fallen way back. Eugene grabbed my arm. "Jesus, look at that!"

It looked good, my god it looked good but I was too scared to appreciate it. Suppose somebody came in and found us there looking? Her dress was way back and she was drunk, those thighs exposed, you could almost see the panties.

"Come on, Eugene, let's get out of here!"

"No, let's look. I want to look at her. Look at all that showing!"

It reminded me of the time I was hitchhiking and a woman picked me up. She had her skirt up high around her waist, well, almost up around her waist. I looked away, I looked down, and I was scared. She just talked to me as I looked through the windshield and I answered her questions, "Where are you going?" "Nice day, isn't it?" But I was scared. I didn't know what to do but I was afraid that if I did it, there'd be trouble, that she'd scream or call the police. So now and then I just sneaked a look and then I turned my eyes away. She finally let me out.

I was scared about Eddie's mother too.

"Listen, Eugene, I'm leaving."

"She's drunk, she doesn't even know we're here."

"Son of a bitch left," she said from the bed. "Left and took the kid, my baby…"

"She's talking," I said.

"She's knocked out," said Eugene, "she doesn't know what the hell."

He moved toward the bed. "Watch this."

He took her skirt and pulled it further back. He pulled it back so you could see the panties. They were pink.

"Eugene, I'm leaving!"

"Chicken!"

Eugene just stood there staring at her thighs and panties. He stood there a long time. Then he took out his cock. I heard Eddie's mother moan. She shifted on the bed just a little. Eugene moved closer. Then he touched her thigh with the end of his cock. She moaned again. Then Eugene spurted. He shot his sperm all over her thigh and there seemed to be plenty of it. You could see it running down her leg. Then Eddie's mother said, "*Shit*!" and she suddenly sat up in bed. Eugene ran past me out the door and I turned and ran too. Eugene ran into the icebox in the kitchen, bounced off and jumped out the screen door. I followed him and we ran down the street. We ran all the way to my house, down the driveway, and we ran into the garage and pulled the doors shut.

"You think she saw us?" I asked.

"I don't know. I shot all over her pink panties."

"You're crazy. What'd you do it for?"

"I got hot. I couldn't help it. I couldn't help myself."

"We'll go to jail."

"You didn't do anything. I shot all over her leg."

"I was watching."

"Listen," said Eugene, "I think I'll go home."

"All right, go on."

I watched him walk up the driveway and then cross the street to his place. I walked out of the garage. I walked through the back porch and into my bedroom and I sat there and waited. Nobody was home. I went into the bathroom and locked the door and I thought about Eddie's mother lying on the bed like that. Only I imagined I got her pink panties off and I got it in. And she liked it…

I waited the rest of the afternoon and I waited all through dinner for something to happen but nothing happened. I went to my bedroom after dinner and sat there and waited. Then it was time to go to sleep and I lay there in bed and I waited. I heard my father snoring in the other room and I still waited. Then I slept.

The next day was Saturday and I saw Eugene on his front lawn with a beebee gun. There were two large palm trees in front of his house and he was trying to kill some of the sparrows who lived up there. He'd already gotten two of them. They had three cats and every time one of the sparrows fell to the grass, wings flopping, one of the cats would rush up and scoop him off.

"Nothing's happened," I said to Eugene.

"If it hasn't happened by now, it won't," he said. "I should have fucked her. I'm sorry now I didn't fuck her."

He got another sparrow and down it came and a very fat grey cat with greenyellow eyes picked it up and was off with it behind the hedge. I walked back across the street to my place. My old man was waiting on the front porch. He looked angry. "Listen, I want you to get busy mowing the lawn! *Now*!"

I walked to the garage and pulled out the mower. First I mowed the driveway, then I went out to the front lawn. The mower was stiff and old and it was hard work. My old man stood there, looking angry, watching me, as I pushed the mower through the tangled grass.

SCUM GRIEF

The poet Victor Valoff was not a very good poet. He had a local reputation, was liked by the ladies and supported by his wife. He was continually giving readings at local bookstores and he was often heard on the Public Radio Station. He read in a loud and dramatic voice but the pitch never varied. Victor was always at climax. That's what attracted the ladies, I guess. Certain of his lines, if taken separately, seemed to have power, but when all the lines were considered as a whole, you knew that Victor was saying nothing, only saying it loudly.

But Vicki, like most ladies, being easily charmed by fools, insisted upon hearing Valoff read. It was a hot Friday night in a Feminist-Lesbian-Revolutionary bookshop. No admission. Valoff read for free. And there would be a display of his art work after the reading. His art work was very modern. A stroke or two, usually red, and a bit of an epigram in a contrasting color. Some piece of wisdom would be inscribed on it like: Green heaven come home to me, I weep grey, gray, grey, gray…

Valoff was intelligent. He knew there were two ways to spell grey.

Photos of Tim Leary hung about. IMPEACH REAGAN signs. I didn't mind the IMPEACH REAGAN signs. Valoff rose and walked to the platform, a half bottle of beer in his hand.

"Look," said Vicki, "look at that face! How he has suffered!"

"Yeah," I said, "and now I'm going to suffer."

Valoff did have a fairly interesting face—compared to most poets. But compared to most poets almost everybody has.

Victor Valoff began:

> "East of the Suez of my heart begins a buzzing buzzing buzzing sombre still, still sombre and suddenly Summer comes home straight on through like a Quarterback sneak on the one yard line of my heart!"

Victor screamed the last line and as he did so somebody near me said, "*Beautiful*!" It was a local feminist poet who had grown tired of blacks and now fucked a doberman in her bedroom. She had braided red hair, dull eyes, and played a mandolin while she read her work. Most of her work involved something about a dead baby's footprint in the sand. She was married to a doctor who was never around (at least he had the good sense not to attend poetry readings). He gave her a large allowance to support her poetry and to feed the doberman.

Valoff continued:

> "Docks and ducks and derivative day Ferment behind my forehead in a most unforgiving way
> o, in a most unforgiving way.
> I sway through the light and darkness..."

"I've got to agree with him there," I told Vicki.

"Please be quiet," she answered.

> "With one thousand pistols and one thousand hopes I step onto the porch of my mind to murder one thousand Popes!"

I found my half pint, uncapped it and took a good hit.

"Listen," said Vicki, "you always get drunk at these readings. Can't you contain yourself?"

"I get drunk at my own readings," I said. "I can't stand my stuff either."

"*Gummed mercy*," Valoff went on, "*that's what we are, gummed mercy, gummed gummed gummed mercy...*"

"He's going to say something about a raven," I said.

"*Gummed mercy*," continued Valoff, "*and the raven forevermore...*"

I laughed. Valoff recognized the laugh. He looked down at me. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "in the audience tonight we have the poet Henry Chinaski."

Little hisses were heard. They knew me. "Sexist pig!" "Drunk!" "Motherfucker!" I took another drink. "Please continue, Victor," I said. He did.

> "…conditioned under the hump of valor the ersatz imminent piddling rectangle is no more than a gene in Genoa a quadruplet Quetzalcoatal and the Chink cries bittersweet and barbaric into her muff!"

"It's beautiful," said Vicki, "but what's he talking about?"

"He's talking about eating pussy."

"I thought so. He's a beautiful man."

"I hope he eats pussy better than he writes."

> "grief, christ, my grief,
> that scum grief,
> stars and stripes of grief,
> waterfalls of grief
> tides of grief,
> grief at discount
> everywhere…"

"'That scum grief,'" I said, "I like that."

"He's stopped talking about eating pussy?"

"Yes, now he says he doesn't feel good."

> "…a Baker's dozen, a cousin's cousin, let in the streptomycin and, propitious, gorge my
> gonfalon.
> I dream the carnival plasma across frantic leather…"

"Now what's he saying?" asked Vicki.

"He's saying he's getting ready to eat pussy again."

"Again?"

Victor read some more and I drank some more. Then he called a ten minute intermission and the audience went up and gathered around the podium. Vicki went up too. It was hot in there and I walked out into the street to cool off. There was a bar a half block away. I got a beer. It wasn't too crowded. There was a basketball game on tv. I watched the game. Of course, I didn't care who won. My only thought was, my god, how they run up and down, up and down. I'll bet their jockstraps are soaking wet, I'll bet their assholes smell something awful. I had another beer and then walked back to the poetry hole. Valoff was already back on. I could hear him half a block down the street: "Choke, Columbia, and the dead horses of my soul greet me at the gates

greet me sleeping, Historians see this tenderest Past
leapt over with
geisha dreams, drilled dead with importunity!"

I found my seat next to Vicki. "What's he saying now?" she asked me.

"He's really not saying very much. Basically what he's saying is that he can't sleep nights. He ought to find a job."

"He's saying he ought to find a job?"

"No, I'm saying that."

> "...the lemming and the falling star are brothers, the contest of the lake is the El Dorado of my heart. come take my head, come take my eyes, larrup me with larkspur..."

"Now what's he saying?"

"He's saying he needs a big fat woman to kick the shit out of him."

"Don't be funny. Does he really say that?"

"We both say that."

> "...I could eat the emptiness, I could fire cartridges of love into the dark I could beg India for your recessive mulch..."

Well, Victor went on and on, and on. One sane person got up and walked out. The remainder of us stayed.

> "...I say, drag the dead gods through the crabgrass!
> I say the palm is lucrative I say, look, look, look around us:
> all love is ours

> all life is ours
> the sun is our dog at the end of a leash there is nothing that can defeat us!
> fuck the salmon!
> we need only reach,
> we need only drag ourselves out of obvious graves, the earth, the dirt,
> the plaid hope of looming grafts to our very senses. We have nothing to take and nothing to give, we need only to begin, begin, begin…!"

"Thank you very much," said Victor Valoff, "for being here."

The applause was very loud. They always applauded. Victor was immense in his glory. He lifted his same bottle of beer. He even managed to blush. Then he grinned, a very human grin. The ladies loved it. I took a last hit on my bottle of whiskey.

They were up around Victor. He was giving his autograph and answering questions. His art show would be next. I managed to get Vicki out of there and we walked along the street back to the car.

"He reads powerfully," she said.

"Yes, he has a good voice."

"What do you think of his work?"

"I think it's pure."

"I think you're jealous."

"Let's stop here for a drink," I said. "There's a basketball game."

"All right," she said.

We were lucky. The game was still on. We sat down.

"Oh boy," said Vicki, "look at the long legs on those guys!"

"Now you're talking," I said. "What'll you have?"

"Scotch and soda."

I ordered two scotch and sodas and we watched the game. Those guys ran up and down, up and down. Wonderful. They seemed very excited about something. The place was hardly crowded at all. It seemed the best part of the night.

NOT QUITE BERNADETTE

I wrapped the towel around my bloody cock and phoned the doctor's office. I had to set the receiver down and dial with one hand while holding the towel with the other. Even as I dialed, a red stain began to blossom through the towel. I got the doctor's receptionist.

"Oh, Mr. Chinaski, what is it now? Did your earplugs get lost in your ears again?"

"No, this is a bit more serious. I need an early appointment."

"How about tomorrow afternoon at 4 p.m.?"

"Miss Simms, this is an emergency."

"What is its nature?"

"Please, I must see the doctor *now*."

"All right. Come on over and we'll try to work you in."

"Thank you, Miss Simms."

I fashioned a temporary bandage by ripping up a clean shirt and winding it about my penis. Luckily I had a bit of adhesive tape but it was old and yellow and didn't grip very well. I had some problem getting my pants on. I looked like I had a gigantic hard-on. I was only able to partly zip up my pants. I made my way to my car, got in and drove to the doctor's office. Getting out in the parking lot I shocked two old ladies coming out of the optometrist's who was downstairs. I managed to get in the elevator alone and go to the third floor. I saw somebody coming up the hallway, turned my back to them and feigned drinking from the water fountain. Then I walked down the hall and into the doctor's office. The waiting room was full of people with no real problems—gonorrhea, herpes, syphilis, cancer, and so forth. I walked up to the receptionist.

"Ah, Mr. Chinaski…"

"Please, Miss Simms, no *jokes*! This *is* an emergency, I assure you. Hurry!"

"You can go in as soon as the doctor has finished with his present patient."

I stood at the partition that separated the receptionist from the rest of us and waited. As soon as the patient emerged I ran into the doctor's office.

"Chinaski, what is it?"

"Emergency, doctor."

"I took off my shoes and stockings, pants and shorts, flung myself back upon the table.

"What do you have here? That's quite a bandage."

I didn't answer. I had my eyes closed and could feel the doctor tugging at the bandage.

"You know," I said, "I knew a girl in a small town. She was in her early teens and she was playing around with a coke bottle. She got it stuck up there and couldn't get it out. She had to go to the doctor. You know how small towns are. The word got out. Her whole life was ruined. She was shunned. Nobody would touch her. The most beautiful girl in town. She finally married a midget in a wheelchair who had some kind of palsy."

"That's old stuff," said my doctor, yanking the last of the bandage off. "How did this happen to you?"

"Well, her name was Bernadette, 22, married. She has long blonde hair that keeps falling into her face and has to be brushed away…"

"Twenty-two?"

"Yes, she had on bluejeans…"

"You're rather badly cut here."

"She knocked on the door. She asked if she could come in. 'Sure,' I said. 'I've had it,' she said and she ran into my bathroom, half closed the door, pulled down her jeans and panties, sat down and began to piss. OOH! CHRIST!"

"Take it easy. I'm sterilizing the wound."

"You know, doctor, wisdom comes at a hell of an hour—when youth is gone, the storm is over and the girls have gone home."

"Quite true."

"OW! OH! JESUS!"

"Please. This must be properly cleaned."

"She came out and told me that last night at her party I hadn't solved the problem of her unhappy love affair. That instead I had gotten everybody drunk, had fallen into a rose bush. That I had ripped my pants, fallen over backwards, hit my head on a large stone. Somebody named Willy had carried me home and my pants fell down and then my shorts, but that I hadn't solved the love affair problem. She said that the affair was over anyhow, and at least I had said some heavy things."

"Where did you meet this girl?"

"I gave a poetry reading in Venice. Met her afterwards in the bar next door."

"Can you recite me a poem?"

"No, doctor. Anyhow, she said 'I've *had* it, man!' She sat on the couch. I sat in a chair across from her. She drank her beer and told me about it: 'I love him, you know, but I can't get any *contact*, he won't talk. I tell him, *talk* to me! But, by god, he won't talk. He says, "It's not you, it's something else." And that ends that.'"

"Now, Chinaski, I'm going to stitch you up. It won't be pleasant."

"Yes, doctor. Anyhow, she got to talking about her life. She said she'd been married three times. I said she didn't show that much wear. And she said, 'I don't? Well, I've been in a madhouse twice.' And I said, 'You too?' And she said, 'You been in a madhouse too?' And I said, 'No, just some women I've known.'"

"Now," said the doctor, "just a little thread. That's all it is. Thread. A bit of embroidery work."

"Oh, shit, isn't there another way?"

"No, you're too badly cut."

“She said she got married at 15. They were calling her a whore for going with this guy. Her parents were calling her a whore so she married the guy to spite them. Her mother was a drunk, in and out of madhouses. Her father beat her all the time. OH JESUS! PLEASE GO EASY!”

“Chinaski, you have more trouble with women than any man I’ve ever met.”

“Then she met this dyke. The dyke took her to a homosexual bar. She left the dyke and went off with a homosexual boy. They lived together. They used to argue over makeup. OH! CHRIST! MERCY! She’d steal his lipstick and then he’d steal hers. Then she married him…”

“This will take any number of stitches. How did this happen?”

“I’m *telling* you, doctor. They had a child. Then they divorced and he took off and left her with the child. She got a job, hired a babysitter, but the job didn’t pay much and after the babysitter’s fees there wasn’t much left. She had to go out at night and hustle. Ten bucks for a piece of ass. It went on for some time. She wasn’t getting anywhere. Then one day at work —she was working for Avon—she started screaming and couldn’t seem to stop. They took her to a madhouse. EASY! EASY! PLEASE!”

“What was her name?”

“Bernadette. She got out of the madhouse, came to L.A., met and married Karl. She told me how she liked my poetry and how she admired the way I drove my car on the sidewalk at 60 m.p.h. after my readings. Then she said that she was hungry and she offered to buy me a hamburger and fries, so she drove me to McDonald’s. PLEASE, DOCTOR! GO SLOWER OR GET A SHARPER NEEDLE OR SOMETHING!”

“I’m almost finished.”

“Well we sat at a table with our hamburgers, french fries, coffee, and then Bernadette told me about her mother. She was worried about her mother. She was also worried about her two sisters. One sister was so unhappy and the other sister was just dull and satisfied. And then there was her boy and she was worried about Karl's relationship with the boy…"

The doctor yawned and stitched another stitch.

"I told her that she was carrying too much weight, to let some of those people float for themselves. Then I noticed that she was trembling and I told her I was sorry I had said that. I took one of her hands and began to rub it. Then I rubbed the other one. I slid her hands up my wrists under my coat sleeves. 'I'm sorry,' I told her, 'I guess you just *care*. There's nothing wrong with that.'"

"But how did it happen? This thing?"

"Well, when I walked Bernadette down the steps my hand was around her waist. She still looked like a high school girl—long silken blond hair; a very sensitive and sexy pair of lips. The only way you could tell about the hell was to look into her eyes. They were in a perpetual state of shock."

"Please get to the happening," said the doctor. "I'm almost finished."

"Well, when we got to my place there was some fool standing on the sidewalk with a dog. I told her to drive further up. She double-parked and I pulled her head back and kissed her. I gave her a long one, pulled back, then followed with another. She called me a son of a bitch. I told her to give an old man a break. I kissed her again, a long one. 'That's not a kiss, man,' she said, 'that's sex, that's almost rape!'"

"*Then* it happened?"

"I slid out the door and she said she'd phone me in a week. I walked into my place and *then* it happened."

"How?"

"Can I be frank with you, doctor?"

"Of course."

"Well, looking at her body and face, her hair, her eyes… listening to her talk, then the kisses, it had gotten me hot."

"So?"

"So I've got this vase. It's a perfect fit for me. I put it into this vase and started thinking of Bernadette. I was going good when the damn thing broke. I had used it several times before but I suppose this time I was terribly excited. She's such a sexy-looking woman…"

"Never never stick that thing into anything made of glass."

"Will I be all right, doctor?"

"Yes, you'll be able to use it again. You were lucky."

I got dressed and out of there. It still felt raw in my shorts. Driving up Vermont I stopped at the grocery. I was out of food. I pushed my cart about picking up hamburger, bread, eggs.

Someday I must tell Bernadette about my close call. If she reads this, she'll know. Last I heard she and Karl went to Florida. She got pregnant. Karl wanted the abortion bit. She didn't. They split. She's still in Florida. She's living with Karl's buddy, Willy. Willy does pornography. He wrote me a couple of weeks ago. I haven't answered yet.

SOME HANGOVER

Kevin’s wife handed him the phone. It was Saturday morning. They were still in bed.

“It’s Bonnie,” she said.

“Hello, Bonnie?”

“You awake, Kevin?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Listen, Kevin, Jeanjean told me.”

“She told you what?”

“That you took her and Cathy into the closet and took their panties off and sniffed their peepees.”

“Sniffed their peepees?”

“That’s what she said.”

“Good God, Bonnie, are you trying to be funny?”

“Jeanjean doesn’t lie about such things. She said you took Cathy and her into the closet and took their panties off and sniffed their peepees.”

“Now wait a minute, Bonnie!”

“Wait, *hell*! Tom’s really mad, he is threatening to kill you. And I think it’s awful, unbelievable! Mother thinks I should call my lawyer.”

Bonnie hung up. Kevin put the phone down.

“What is it?” asked his wife.

“Now look, Gwen, it’s nothing.”

“Are you ready for breakfast?”

“I don’t think I can eat.”

“Kevin, what is the matter?”

"Bonnie claims I took Jeanjean and Cathy into the closet and took their panties off and sniffed their peepees."

"Oh, come on!"

"That's what she said."

"Did you?"

"God, Gwen, I was drinking. Last thing I remember about that party, I was standing out on the front lawn looking at the moon. It was a big moon, I had never seen a bigger moon."

"And you don't remember the other?"

"No."

"You black out when you are drinking, Kevin. You know you black out when you are drinking."

"I don't think I'd do anything like that. I'm no child molester."

"Little girls 8 and 10 years old are pretty cute."

Gwen walked into the bathroom. When she came out she said, "I pray to God it happened. I'd be happy to God if it really happened!"

"What? What the hell are you saying?"

"I mean it. It might slow you down. It might make you think twice about your drinking. It might even make you quit drinking entirely. Every time you go to a party you've got to drink more than anybody, you have got to *pour* it down. Then you always do something foolish and disgusting, although usually in the past it has been with a full-grown woman."

"Gwen, the whole thing has got to be some kind of joke."

"It's no joke. Wait until you have to face Cathy and Jeanjean and Tom and Bonnie!"

"Gwen, I love those two little girls."

"*What*?"

"Oh shit, forget it."

Gwen walked into the kitchen and Kevin went to the bathroom. He threw cold water on his face and looked at himself in the mirror. What did a child molester look like? Answer: like everybody else until they told him he was one.

Kevin sat down to crap. Crapping seemed so safe, so warm. Surely this thing had not happened. He was in his own bathroom. There was his towel, there was his washrag, there was the toilet paper, there was the bathtub, and under his feet, soft and warm, was the bathroom rug, red, clean, comfortable. Kevin finished, wiped, flushed, washed his hands like a civilized man and walked into the kitchen. Gwen had the bacon on. She poured him a cup of coffee.

"Thanks."

"Scrambled?"

"Scrambled."

"Married ten years and you always say 'scrambled.'"

"More amazing than that, you always ask."

"Kevin, if this gets around, you are out of a job. The bank does not need a branch manager who is a child molester."

"I guess not."

"Kevin, we've got to have a meeting with the families involved. We've got to sit down and talk this thing out."

"You sound like a scene from *The Godfather*."

"Kevin, you're in big trouble. There's no way of getting around it. You're in trouble. Put your toast in. Push it in slow or it will pop right up, there is something wrong with the spring."

Kevin put the toast in. Gwen dished out the bacon and eggs.

"Jeanjean is something of a flirt. She's just like her mother. It's a wonder it hasn't happened before now. Not that I'm saying there is any excuse."

She sat down. The toast came up and Kevin handed her a slice.

"Gwen, when you don't remember something it is very strange. It's the same as if it never happened."

"Some murderers forget what they've done too."

"You're not comparing this to murder?"

"It can seriously affect the future of two little girls."

"A lot of things can."

"I'd have to guess that your behavior was destructive."

"Maybe it was constructive. Maybe they liked it."

"It's been a hell of a long time," Gwen said, "since you sniffed my peepee."

"That's right, bring yourself into it."

"I am in it. We live in a community of 20,000 people and something like this is not going to stay a secret."

"How are they going to prove it? It's two little girls' word against mine."

"More coffee?"

"Yes."

"I meant to get you some tabasco sauce. I know you like it on your eggs."

"You always forget."

"I know. Listen, Kevin, you finish your breakfast. You take as long as you want to eat. Excuse me. I have something to do."

"All right."

He wasn't sure if he loved Gwen but living with her was comfortable. She took care of all the details and details were what drove a man crazy. He put plenty of butter on his toast. Butter was one of man's last luxuries. Automobiles would one day be too expensive to buy and everybody would just sit around eating butter and waiting. The Jesus freaks who talked about the end of the world were looking better every day. Kevin finished his toast and butter and Gwen walked back in.

"All right, it's arranged. I've called everybody."

"What do you mean?"

"There's going to be a meeting in one hour at Tom's place."

"Tom's place?"

"Yes, Tom and Bonnie and Bonnie's parents and Tom's brother and sister—they'll all be there."

"Will the kids be there?"

"No."

"What about Bonnie's lawyer?"

"Are you frightened?"

"Wouldn't you be?"

"I don't know. I have never sniffed a little girl's peepee."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because it is neither decent nor civilized."

"And where has our decent civilization led us?"

"I guess to men like you who take little girls into closets."

"You seem to be enjoying this."

"I don't know if those little girls will ever forgive you."

"You want me to ask their forgiveness? I have to do that? For something I don't even remember?"

"Why not?"

"Let them forget it. Why drive the point home?"

As Kevin and Gwen drove up in front of Tom's place, Tom stood up and said, "Here they are. Now we've all got to stay calm. There's a decent, fair way to settle this. We're all mature human beings. We can settle everything among ourselves. There's no need to call the police. Last night I wanted to kill Kevin. Now I just want to help him."

The six relatives of Jeanjean and Cathy sat and waited. The doorbell rang. Tom opened the door. "Hello, folks."

"Hello," said Gwen. Kevin didn't say anything.

"Sit down."

They walked over and sat on the couch. "Drink?"

"No," said Gwen.

"Scotch and soda," said Kevin.

Tom mixed the drink, then handed it to Kevin. Kevin tossed it off, reached in his pocket for a cigarette.

"Kevin," said Tom, "we've decided you should see a psychologist."

"Not a psychiatrist?"

"No, a psychologist."

"All right."

"And we think you should pay for any therapy Jeanjean and Cathy might need."

"All right."

"We're going to keep this quiet, for your sake and for the sake of the children."

"Thanks."

“Kevin, there’s only one thing we’d like to know. We’re your friends. We’ve been friends for years. Just one thing. *Why do you drink so much*?”

“Hell, I don’t know. I guess, mostly, I just get bored.”

A WORKING DAY

Joe Mayer was a freelance writer. He had a hangover and the telephone awakened him at 9 a.m. He got up and answered it. "Hello?"

"Hi, Joe. How's it going?"

"Oh, beautiful."

"Beautiful, eh?"

"Yes?"

"Vicki and I just moved into our new house. We don't have a phone yet. But I can give you the address. You got a pen there?"

"Just a minute."

Joe took down the address.

"I didn't like that last story of yours I saw in *Hot Angel*."

"O.K." said Joe.

"I don't mean I didn't like it, I mean I don't like it compared to most of your stuff. By the way, do you know where Buddy Edwards is? Griff Martin who used to edit *Hot Tales* is looking for him. I thought you might know."

"I don't know where he is."

"I think he might be in Mexico."

"He might be."

"Well, listen, we'll be around to see you soon."

"Sure." Joe hung up. He put a couple of eggs in a pan of water, set some coffee water on and took an Alka Seltzer. Then he went back to bed.

The phone rang again. He got up and answered it.

"Joe?"

"Yes?"

"This is Eddie Greer."

"Oh yes."

"We want you to read for a benefit…"

"What is it?"

"For the I.R.A."

"Listen, Eddie, I don't go for politics or religion or whatever. I really don't know what's going on over there. I don't have a tv, read the papers…any of that. I don't know who's right or who's wrong, if there is such a thing."

"England's wrong, man."

"I can't read for the I.R.A., Eddie."

"All right, then…"

The eggs were done. He sat down, peeled them, put on some toast and mixed the Sanka in with the hot water. He got down the eggs and toast and had two coffees. Then he went back to bed.

He was just about asleep when the phone rang again. He got up and answered it.

"Mr. Mayer?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Mike Haven, I'm a friend of Stuart Irving's. We once appeared in *Stone Mule* together when *Stone Mule* was edited in Salt Lake City."

"Yes?"

"I'm down from Montana for a week. I'm staying at the Hotel Sheraton here in town. I'd like to come see you and talk to you."

"Today's a bad day, Mike."

"Well, maybe I can come over later in the week?"

"Yes, why don't you call me later on?"

"You know, Joe, I write just like you do, both in poetry and prose. I want to bring some of my stuff over and read it to you. You'll be surprised. My stuff is really powerful."

"Oh yes?"

"You'll see."

The mailman was next. One letter. Joe opened it: Dear Mr. Mayer:

I got your address from Sylvia who you used to write to in Paris many years ago. Sylvia is still alive in San Francisco today and still writing her wild and prophetic and angelic and mad poems. I'm living in Los Angeles now and would just love to come and visit you! Please tell me when it would be all right with you.

love, Diane

Joe got out of his robe and got dressed. The phone rang again. He walked over to it, looked at it and didn't answer it. He walked out, got into his car and drove it toward Santa Anita. He drove slowly. He turned the radio on and got some symphony music. It wasn't too smoggy. He drove down Sunset, took his favorite cutoff, drove over the hill toward Chinatown, past the Annex, up past Little Joe's, past Chinatown and took the slow easy ride past the railroad yards, looking down at the old brown boxcars. If he were any damned good at painting he'd like to get that one down. Maybe he'd paint them anyhow. He drove in up Broadway and over Huntington Drive to the track. He got a corned beef sandwich and a coffee, split the Form and sat down. It looked like a fair card.

He caught Rosalena in the first at $10.80, Wife's Objection in the second at $9.20 and hooked them in the daily double for $48.40. He'd had $2 win on Rosalena and $5 win on Wife's Objection, so he was $73.20 up. He ran out on Sweetott, was second with Harbor Point, second with Pitch Out, second with Brannan, all win bets, and he was sitting $48.20 ahead when he hit $20 win on Southern Cream, which brought him back to $73.20 again.

It wasn't bad at the track. He only met three people he knew. Factory workers. Black. From the old days.

The eighth race was the problem. Cougar who was packing 128 was in against Unconscious packing 123. Joe didn't consider the others in the race. He couldn't make up his mind. Cougar was 3-to-5 and Unconscious was 7-to-2. Being $73.20

ahead he felt he could afford the luxury of betting the 3-to-5 shot. He laid $30 win. Cougar broke sluggishly, acting as if he were running in a ditch. By the time he was halfway around the first turn he was 17 lengths back of the lead horse. Joe knew he had a loser. At the finish his 3-to-5 was five lengths back and the race was over.

He went $10 and $10 on Barbizon, Jr. and Lost at Sea in the ninth, failed, and walked out with $23.20. It was easier picking tomatoes. He got into his old car and drove slowly back…

Just as he got into the tub the doorbell rang. He toweled and got into his shirt and pants. It was Max Billinghouse. Max was in his early twenties, toothless, red-haired. He worked as a janitor and always wore bluejeans and a dirty white t-shirt. He sat down in a chair and crossed his legs "Well, Mayer, what's happening?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, are you surviving on your writing?"

"At the moment."

"Is there anything new?"

"Not since you were here last week."

"How did your poetry reading come out?"

"It was all right."

"The crowd that goes to poetry readings is a very phoney crowd."

"Most crowds are."

"You got any candy?" Max asked.

"Candy?"

"Yeah, I got a sweet tooth. I've got this sweet tooth."

"I don't have any candy."

Max got up and walked into the kitchen. He came out with a tomato and two slices of bread. He sat down.

"Jesus, you don't have anything to eat around here."

"I'm going to have to go to the store."

"You know," said Max, "if I had to read in front of a crowd, I'd really insult them, I'd hurt their feelings."

"You might."

"But I can't write. I think I'm going to carry around a tape recorder. I talk to myself sometimes when I'm working. Then I can write down what I say and I'll have a story."

Max was an hour-and-a-half man. He was good for an hour-and-a-half. He never listened, he just talked. After an hour-and-a-half, Max stood up.

"Well, I gotta go."

"O.K., Max."

Max left. He always talked about the same things. How he had insulted some people on a bus. How once he had met Charles Manson. How a man was better off with a whore than with a decent woman. Sex was in the head. He didn't need new clothes, a new car. He was a loner. He didn't need people.

Joe went into the kitchen and found a can of tuna and made three sandwiches. He took out the pint of scotch he had been saving and poured a good scotch and water. He flicked the radio to the classical station. "The Blue Danube Waltz." He flicked it off. He finished the sandwiches. The doorbell rang. Joe walked to the door and opened it. It was Hymie. Hymie had a soft job somewhere in some city government near L.A. He was a poet.

"Listen," he said, "that book I had an idea for, *An Anthology of L.A. Poets*, let's forget it."

"All right."

Hymie sat down. "We need a new title. I think I have it. *Mercy for the Warmongers*. Think about it."

"I kind of like it," said Joe.

"And we can say, 'This book is for Franco, and for Lee Harvey Oswald and Adolf Hitler.' Now I'm Jewish, so that takes some guts. What do you think?"

"Sounds good."

Hymie got up and did his imitation of a typical old-time Jewish fat man, a very Jewish fat man. He spit on himself and sat down. Hymie was very funny. Hymie was the funniest man Joe knew. Hymie was good for an hour. After an hour, Hymie stood up and left. He always talked about the same things. How most of the poets were very bad. That it was tragic, it was so tragic it was laughable. What could a guy do?

Joe had another good scotch and water and walked over to the typewriter. He typed two lines, then the phone rang. It was Dunning at the hospital. Dunning liked to drink a lot of beer. He'd done his 20 in the army. Dunning's father had been the editor of a famous little magazine. Dunning's father had died in June. Dunning's wife was ambitious. She had pushed him to be a doctor, hard. He'd made it to chiropractor. And was working as a male nurse while trying to save up for an eight or ten thousand dollar x-ray machine.

"How about coming over and drinking some beer with you?" asked Dunning.

"Listen, can we put it off?" asked Joe.

"What'sa matter? You writing?"

"Just started."

"All right. I'll take a rain check."

"Thanks, Dunning."

Joe sat down at the machine again. It wasn't bad. He got halfway down the page when he heard footsteps. Then a knock. Joe opened the door.

It was two young kids. One with a black beard, the other smooth-shaven.

The kid with the beard said, "I saw you at your last reading."

"Come in," said Joe.

They came in. They had six bottles of imported beer, green bottles.

"I'll get an opener," said Joe.

They sat there sucking at the beer.

"It was a good reading," said the kid with the beard.

"Who was your major influence?" asked the one without the beard.

"Jeffers. Longer poems. *Tamar. Roan Stallion*. So forth."

"Any new writing that interests you?"

"No."

"They say you're coming out of the underground, that you're part of the Establishment. What do you think of that?"

"Nothing."

There were some more questions of the same order. The boys were only good for one beer apiece. Joe took care of the other four. They left in 45 minutes. But the one without the beard said, just as they left, "We'll be back."

Joe sat down to the machine again with a new drink. He couldn't type. He got up and walked to the phone. He dialed. And waited. She was there. She answered.

"Listen," said Joe, "let me get out of here. Let me come down there and lay up."

"You mean you want to stay tonight?"

"Yes."

"Again?"

"Yes, again."

"All right."

Joe walked around the corner of the porch and right down the driveway. She lived three or four courts down. He knocked. Lu let him in. The lights were out. She just had on panties and led him to the bed.

"God," he moaned.

"What is it?"

"Well, it's all unexplainable in a way or *almost* unexplainable."

"Just take off your clothes and come to bed."

Joe did. He crawled in. He didn't know at first if it would work again. So many nights in a row. But her body was there and it was a young body. And the lips were open and real. Joe floated in. It was good being in the dark. He worked her over good. He even got down there again and tongued that cunt. Then as he mounted, after four or five strokes he heard a voice…

"Mayer…I'm looking for a Joe Mayer…"

He heard his landlord's voice. His landlord was drunk.

"Well, if he ain't in that front apartment, you check this one back here. He's either in one or the other."

Joe got in four or five more strokes before the knocking began at the door. Joe slid out and, naked, went to the door. He opened a side window.

“Yeah?”

“Hey, Joe! Hi, Joe, what you doin’ Joe?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, how about some beer, Joe?”

“No,” said Joe. He slammed the side window and walked back to the bed, got in.

“Who was it?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I didn’t recognize the face.”

“Kiss me, Joe. Just don’t lay there.”

He kissed her as the Southern California moon came through the Southern California curtains. He was Joe Mayer. Freelance writer.

He had it made.

THE MAN WHO LOVED ELEVATORS

Harry stood in the apartment house driveway waiting for the elevator to come down. Just as the door opened he heard a woman's voice behind him. "Just a moment, please!" She stepped into the elevator and the door closed. She had on a yellow dress, her hair was piled on top of her head, and goofy pearl earrings swung on long silver chains. She had a large ass and was heavily built. Her breasts and body seemed to be striving to burst out of that yellow dress. Her eyes were the palest green and looked right through him. She carried a bag of groceries with the word *Vons* printed on it. Her lips were smeared with lipstick. Her thick painted lips were obscene, almost ugly, an insult. The bright red lipstick glistened and Harry reached over and pushed the EMERGENCY button.

It worked, the elevator stopped. Harry moved toward her. With one hand he lifted her skirt and stared at her legs. She had unbelievable legs, all muscle and flesh. She seemed stricken, frozen. He grabbed her as she dropped the bag of groceries. Cans of vegetables, an avocado, toilet paper, packaged meat and three candy bars spilled to the elevator floor. Then his mouth was on those lips. They opened. He reached down and lifted the skirt. He kept his mouth on hers and worked the panties off. Then, standing up, he took her, banging her hard against the elevator wall. When he finished, he zipped up, hit the third floor button, and waited, his back to her. When the door opened, he stepped out. The door closed behind him and the elevator was gone.

Harry walked down to his apartment, put the key in and opened the door. His wife, Rochelle, was in the kitchen cooking dinner.

"How'd it go?" she asked.

"Same old shit," he said.

"Dinner in ten minutes," she said.

Harry walked to the bathroom, got out of his things and took a shower. The job was getting to him. Six years and he didn't have a dime in the bank. That's how they hooked you—they gave you just enough to keep alive but they never gave you enough so you could finally escape.

He soaped up good, washed off and stood there, letting the very hot water run down the back of his neck. It took away the fatigue. He toweled off and put on his robe, walked into the kitchen and sat down at the table. Rochelle was dishing it out. Meatballs and gravy. She made good meatballs and gravy.

"Listen," he said, "give me some good news."

"Good news?"

"You know what."

"The period?"

"Yes."

"I haven't had it."

"Christ."

"The coffee's not ready."

"You always forget."

"I know. I don't know what makes me do that."

Rochelle sat down and they began eating without the coffee. The meatballs were good.

"Harry," she said, "we can get an abortion."

"All right," he said. "If it comes to that, we'll do it."

The next evening he got on the elevator and rode alone. He rode to the third floor and got out. Then he turned around, got back in and pushed the button again. He rode down to the driveway, got out, walked over to his car and sat and waited. He saw her coming up the driveway, this time without any groceries. He opened his car door.

This time she had on a red dress, shorter and tighter-fitting than the yellow one. Her hair was down and it was long. It almost reached her behind. She had on the same goofy earrings and her lips were more heavily smeared with lipstick than before. As she stepped into the elevator he followed her. They rose up and once again he pushed the EMERGENCY button. Then he was upon her, his lips on that red obscene mouth. Again she didn't have on pantyhose, just red knee stockings. Harry worked the panties off and put it in. They banged against all four walls. It lasted longer this time. Then Harry zipped up, turned his back on her and pushed the "3" button.

When he opened the door Rochelle was singing. She had a terrible voice so Harry got into the shower in a hurry. He came out in his robe, sat at the table.

"Christ," he said, "they laid off four guys today, even Jim Bronson."

"That's too bad," said Rochelle.

There were steaks and french fries, salad and hot garlic bread. Not bad.

"You know how long Jim's been there?"

"No."

"Five years."

Rochelle didn't answer. "Five years," said Harry. "They just don't care, those bastards have no mercy."

"I didn't forget the coffee this time, Harry."

She leaned over and kissed him as she poured his cup. "I'm improving, you see?"

"Yeah."

She went and sat down. "My period started today."

"What? Is it true?"

"Yes, Harry."

"That's great, great…"

"I don't want a kid until you want one, Harry."

"Rochelle, we ought to *celebrate*! A bottle of good wine! I'll go get one after dinner."

"I've already got it, Harry."

Harry got up and walked around the table. He stood almost behind Rochelle and tilted her head backwards with one hand under her chin and kissed her. "I love you, baby."

They ate dinner. It was a good dinner. And a good bottle of wine…

Harry got out of his car as she walked up the driveway. She waited for him and they got on the elevator together. She had on a blue and white dress, a flower print, white shoes, white ankle socks. Her hair was piled up on her head again and she smoked a Benson and Hedges cigarette.

Harry pushed the EMERGENCY button.

"Wait a minute, mister!"

It was the second time Harry had heard her voice. The voice was a bit hoarse but it wasn't a bad voice at all.

"Yes," asked Harry, "what is it?"

"Let's go to my apartment."

"All right."

She pushed the "4" button, they went up, the door opened and they walked down the hall to 404. She unlocked the door.

"Nice place," said Harry.

"I like it. Can I get you something to drink?"

"Sure."

She walked into the kitchen. "I'm Nana," she said.

"I'm Harry."

"I know you are but what's your name?"

"You're funny," said Harry.

She came out with two drinks and they sat on the couch and drank them. "I work at Zody's discount," said Nana. "I'm a counter girl at Zody's."

"That's nice."

"What the hell's nice about it?"

"I mean, it's nice that we're here together."

"Really?"

"Sure."

"Let's go into the bedroom."

Harry followed her. Nana finished her drink and set the empty glass on the dresser. She walked into the closet. It was a large closet. She began to sing and to remove her clothing. Nana sang better than Rochelle. Harry sat on the edge of the bed and finished his drink. Nana came out of the closet and stretched out on the bed. She was naked. The hair on her cunt was much darker than the hair on her head.

"Well?" she said.

"Oh," said Harry. He took off his shoes, he took off his stockings, he took off his shirt, his pants, his undershirt, his shorts. Then he got on the bed beside her. She turned her head and he kissed her. "Listen," he said, "do we have to have all these lights on?"

"Of course not." Nana got up and switched off the overhead light and the bedside lamp. Harry felt her mouth on his. Her tongue entered, flicked in and out. Harry climbed on top of her. She was very soft, something like a waterbed. He kissed and licked her breasts, kissed her mouth and her neck. He continued to kiss her for some time.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said.

"It's not working, is it?"

"No."

Harry got off and began dressing in the dark. Nana switched on the bed lamp.

"What are you? An elevator freak?"

"No, no…"

"You can only do it in elevators, is that it?"

"No, no, you were the first one, really. I don't know what came over me."

"But I'm here now," Nana said.

"I know it," he said, pulling his pants on. Then he sat down and started putting on his shoes and stockings.

"Listen, you son of a bitch—"

"Yes?"

"When you are ready and you want me, come to my apartment, understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

Harry was fully dressed and standing again.

"No more on the elevator, understand?"

"I understand."

"If you ever rape me on the elevator again I'll call the law, that's a promise."

"O.K., O.K."

Harry walked out of the bedroom, through the living room and out the apartment door. He walked down to the elevator and pushed the button. The door opened and he stepped in. The elevator began to descend. There was a petite Oriental woman standing next to him. She had black hair. Black skirt, white blouse, pantyhose, tiny feet, high-heeled shoes. She was dark complexioned, with just a trace of lipstick. That very small body had an amazing, sexy behind. The eyes were brown and very deep and looked tired. Harry reached and pushed the EMERGENCY button. As he moved toward her she screamed. He slapped her hard across the face, got out his handkerchief and forced it into her mouth. He locked one of his arms about her waist and as she clawed him across the face with her free hand he reached down and pulled up her skirt. He liked what he saw.

HEAD JOB

Margie usually began playing Chopin nocturnes when the sun went down. She lived in a large house set back from the street and by sundown she was high on brandy or scotch. At 43 her figure was still slim, her face delicate. Her husband had died young five years before and she lived in apparent solitude. The husband had been a doctor and lucky in the stock market and the money was invested to give her a fixed income of $2,000 a month. A good portion of the $2,000 went for brandy or scotch.

She'd had two lovers since the death of her husband but both affairs had been desultory and short-lived. Men seemed to lack magic, most of them were bad lovers, sexually and spiritually. Their interests seemed to center on new cars, sports and television. At least Harry, her late husband, had taken her to an occasional symphony. God knows, Mehta was a very bad conductor but he beat watching Laverne and Shirley. Margie had simply resigned herself to an existence without the male animal. She lived a quiet life with her piano and her brandy and her scotch. And when the sun went down she needed her piano very much, and her Chopin, and her scotch and/or brandy. She would begin to light one cigarette after another as the evening arrived.

Margie had one amusement. A new couple had moved into the house next door. Only they were hardly a couple. He was 20 years older than the woman, was bearded, powerful, violent and appeared half-mad. He was an ugly man who always looked either intoxicated or hung over. The woman he lived with was odd, too—sullen, indifferent. Almost in a dream-state. The two appeared to have an affinity for each other, yet it was as if two enemies had been thrown together. They fought continually. Margie usually would first hear the woman's voice, then suddenly and loudly she would hear the man's, and the man always screamed some vile indecency. Sometimes the voices would be followed by the sound of breaking glass. More often, though, the man would be seen driving away in his old car and the neighborhood would be quiet for two or three days until his return. Twice the police had taken the man away, but he always returned.

One day Margie saw his photo in the newspaper—the man was the poet Marx Renoffski. She had heard of his work. She went to the bookstore the next day and bought all his available books. That afternoon she mixed his poetry with her brandy and as it got dark that night she forgot to play her Chopin nocturnes. She gathered from some of the love poems that he was living with the sculptress, Karen Reeves. For some reason, Margie didn't feel as lonely as she once had.

The house belonged to Karen and there were many parties. Always during the parties, when the music and the laughter were the loudest, she would see the large, bearded figure of Marx Renoffski emerge from the rear of the house. He would sit in the backyard alone with his beer bottle in the moonlight. It was then that Margie would remember his love poems and wish she could meet him.

Friday night, several weeks after she had bought his books, she heard them arguing loudly. Marx had been drinking and Karen's voice became more and more shrill. "Listen," she heard Marx's voice, "any time I want a goddamned drink I'm gonna take a goddamned drink!" "You're the ugliest thing that has ever happened in my life!" she heard Karen say. Then there were sounds of a scuffle. Margie turned out the lights and pressed close to the window. "God damn you," she heard Marx say, "you keep attacking me and I'll let you have one!"

She saw Marx come out on the front porch carrying his typewriter. It wasn't a portable, but a standard model, and Marx staggered down the steps carrying it, almost falling several times. "I'm getting rid of your head," Karen screamed. "I'm throwing your head out!" "Go ahead," Marx said, "dump it." She saw Marx load the typewriter into his car and then she saw a large heavy object, evidently the head, come flying off the end of the porch and into her yard. It bounced and settled just under a large rose bush. Marx drove off in his car. All the lights went out in Karen Reeves' house and it was quiet.

When Margie awakened the next morning it was 8:45. She made her toilet, put two eggs on to boil, and had a coffee with a jigger of brandy. She walked to the front window. The large clay object was still under the rose bush. She went back, took out the eggs, cooled them under cold water and peeled them. She sat down to eat the eggs and opened a copy of Marx Renoffski's latest book of poems, *One, Two, Three, I Love Me*. She opened it near the middle: oh, I've got squadrons
of pain battalions, armies of
pain continents of pain ha, ha, ha,
                and
              I've got you.

Margie finished the eggs, put two jiggers of brandy in her second coffee, drank it, put on her green striped pants, her yellow sweater, and looking a little bit like Katharine Hepburn looked at 43, she slipped into her red sandals and walked out into her front yard. Marx's car wasn't there on the street and Karen's house looked very quiet. She walked toward the rose bush. The sculpted head was face-down under the bush. Margie could feel her heart beat. She took her foot and rolled the head over and the face looked up at her out of the dirt. It certainly was Marx Renoffski. She picked Marx up, and holding him carefully against her pale yellow sweater she carried him into the house. She put him on top of her piano, then had a brandy and water and sat down and looked at him while she drank it.

Marx was craggy and ugly but very real. Karen Reeves was a good sculptress. Margie was thankful to Karen Reeves. She continued to study Marx's head, she could see everything there: kindness, hatred, fear, madness, love, humor, but she saw mostly the love and the humor. When KSUK came on the air with the classical music program at noon, she turned the radio on loudly and began to drink with real enjoyment.

Around 4 p.m., still drinking brandy, she began talking to him. "Marx, I understand you. I could bring you real happiness."

Marx didn't answer, he just sat there on top of the piano. "Marx, I've read your books. You're a sensitive and gifted man, Marx, and so funny. I understand you darling, I'm not like that…that other woman."

Marx just kept grinning, looking at her through his little slitted eyes.

"Marx, I could play you Chopin…the nocturnes, the études."

Margie sat down at the piano and began playing. He was right there. One just *knew* that Marx never watched football on tv. He probably watched Shakespeare and Ibsen and Chekov on Channel 28. And like in his poems, he was a great lover. She poured more brandy and played on. Marx Renoffski listened.

When Margie was finished with her concert, she looked at Marx. He had enjoyed it. She was sure of it. She stood up. Marx's head was just level with hers. She bent over and gave him a little kiss. She drew back. He was grinning, he was grinning his delightful grin. She put her mouth on his again and gave him a slow, passionate kiss.

The next morning Marx was still there on the piano. Marx Renoffski, poet, modern poet, alive, dangerous, lovely and sensitive. She looked out the front window. Marx's car was not there yet. He was staying away. He was staying away from that…bitch.

Margie turned and spoke to him. "Marx, you need a good woman." She walked to the kitchen, put two eggs on to boil, put a jigger of scotch into her coffee. She hummed to herself. The day was identical to the preceding one. Only better. It felt better. She read some more of Marx's work. She even wrote a poem of her own: this most divine accident

has brought us
together even though you are clay and I am flesh
we have touched
we have somehow touched

At 4 p.m. the doorbell rang. She walked to the door and opened it. It was Marx Renoffski. He was intoxicated.

"Baby," he said, "we know you got the head. What are you going to do with my head?"

Margie couldn't answer. Marx pushed his way in.

"All right, where is the goddamned thing? Karen wants it back."

The head was in the music room. Marx walked around. "Nice place you got here. You live alone, don't you?"

"Yes."

"What's the matter, you afraid of men?"

"No."

"Listen, next time Karen runs me out I think I'll come over here. O.K.?"

Margie didn't answer.

"You didn't answer. That means O.K. Well, fine. But I still have to get that head. Listen. I hear you playing Chopin when the sun goes down. You got class. I like class broads. I'll bet you drink brandy, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Pour me a brandy. Three jiggers in a half glass of water."

Margie went into the kitchen. When she came out with the drink he was in the music room. He'd found the head. He was leaning against it, his elbow resting on top of the skull. She handed him his drink.

"Thanks. Yeah, class, you're class. You paint, write, compose? You do anything besides play Chopin?"

"No."

"Ah," he said, raising his drink and downing half of it. "I bet you do."

"Do what?"

"Fuck. I bet you're a great fuck."

"I don't know."

"Well, I know. And you shouldn't waste it. I don't want to see you waste it."

Marx Renoffski finished his drink and placed it on top of the piano next to the head. He walked over to her and grabbed her. He smelled of vomit, cheap wine and bacon. Needle-like hairs from his beard poked into her face as he kissed her. Then he pulled his face away and looked at her with his tiny eyes. "You don't wanna miss out on life, baby!" She felt his penis rise against her. "I eat pussy too. I never ate pussy until I was 50. Karen taught me. Now I'm the best in the world."

"I don't like to be rushed," Margie said weakly.

"Ah, that's fine! That's what I like: *spirit*! Chaplin fell in love with Goddard when he saw her biting into an apple! I'll bet you bite an apple damn good! I'll bet you can do other things with your mouth, yes, yes!"

Then he kissed her again. When he broke away he asked Margie, "Where's the bedroom?"

"Why?"

"Why? Because that's where we're going to do it!"

"Do what?"

"Fuck, of course!"

"Get out of my house!"

"You don't mean it?"

"I mean it."

"You mean you don't want to fuck?"

"Exactly."

"Listen, there are ten thousand women who want to go to bed with me!"

"I'm not one of them."

"O.K., pour me another drink and I'll go."

"It's a bargain." Margie went to the kitchen, put three jiggers of brandy into a half glass of water, came out and handed it to him.

"Listen, do you know who I am?"

"Yes."

"I'm Marx Renoffski, the poet."

"I said I knew who you were."

"Oh," said Marx, and he drained the glass. "Well, I gotta go. Karen, she don't trust me."

"You tell Karen that I think she's a fine sculptress."

"Oh, yeah, sure…" Marx picked up the head, walked through the room and toward the door. Margie followed him. Marx stopped at the door. "Listen, don't you ever get hot pants?"

"Of course."

"What do you do?"

"I masturbate."

Marx drew himself up. "Madam, that's a crime against nature and, more importantly, against me." He closed the door. She watched him go carefully down the walk carrying his head. Then he turned and went up the path to Karen Reeves' house.

Margie went into the music room. She sat down at the piano. The sun was going down. She was right on schedule. She began to play Chopin. She played Chopin better than she ever had before.

TURKEYNECK MORNING

At 6 a.m. Barney awakened and began poking her in the ass with his cock. Shirley pretended to be asleep. Barney poked harder and harder. She got up out of bed and went to the bathroom and urinated. When she came out he had the quilt off and was poking it up in the air under the bedsheet.

"Look, baby!" he said. "Mt. Everest!"

"Should I start breakfast?"

"Breakfast, shit! Come on back in here!"

Shirley got back in and he grabbed her head and kissed her. His breath was bad and his beard was worse. He took her hand and placed it on his cock.

"Think of all the women who'd like to have this thing!"

"Barney, I'm just not in the mood."

"What do you mean, you're not in the mood?"

"I mean, I just don't feel sexy."

"You will, baby, you will!"

They slept without pajamas in the summer and he climbed on top of her. "Open up, goddamn it! You sick?"

"Barney, please…"

"Please, what? I want some ass and I'm going to get some ass!"

He kept forcing with his cock until he entered her. "You goddamned whore, I'll rip you wide open!"

Barney fucked like a machine. She had no feelings for him. How could any woman marry a man like that? she wondered. How could any woman live with a man like that for three years? When they had first met he hadn't seemed so…much like hardwood.

"You like that turkeyneck, kid?"

The full weight of his heavy body was on her. He was sweating. He offered her no relief.

"I'm coming, baby, I'm COMING!"

Barney rolled off and wiped on the sheet. Shirley got up, went to the bathroom and douched. Then she went to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. She put on the potatoes, the bacon, the coffee. She broke the eggs into the bowl and scrambled them. She had on her slippers and her bathrobe. The bathrobe said, "HERS." Barney came out of the bathroom. He had shaving cream on his face.

"Hey, baby, where are those green shorts of mine with the red stripes?"

She didn't answer.

"Listen, I asked you where those shorts were!"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? I bust my hump out there from eight to twelve hours a day and you don't know where my shorts are?"

"I don't know."

"The coffee's boiling over! *Look*!"

Shirley shut the flame off.

"Either you don't make coffee at all, either you forget the coffee or you boil it all away! Or you forget to buy bacon or you burn the fucking toast or you lose my shorts, or you do *some* fucking thing. You always do *some* fucking thing!"

"Barney, I'm not feeling good…"

"And you're *always* not feeling good! When the *hell* you gonna *start* feeling good? I go out and bust my hump and you lay around reading magazines all day and feeling sorry for your soft ass. You think it's *easy* out there? You realize there are ten percent unemployed? You realize I've got to fight for my job every day, day after day while you sit in an armchair feeling sorry for yourself? And drinking wine and smoking cigarettes and talking to your friends? Girlfriends, boyfriends, whoever the hell friends. You think it's *easy* for me out there?"

"I know it's not easy, Barney."

"You don't even want to give me a piece of ass anymore."

Shirley poured the scrambled eggs into the pan. "Why don't you finish shaving? Breakfast will be ready soon."

"I mean, what's your reluctance about giving me a piece of ass? That thing rimmed in gold?"

She stirred up the eggs with a fork. Then she picked up the spatula. "It's because I can't stand you anymore, Barney. I hate you."

"You hate me? What do you mean?"

"I mean, I can't stand the way you walk. I can't stand the hairs that stick out of your nose. I don't like your voice, your eyes. I don't like your mind or the way you talk. I don't like you."

"And what about *you*? What do *you* have to offer? *Look* at you! You couldn't get a job in a third-rate whorehouse!"

"I've got one."

He hit her then, open-handed, on the side of the face. She dropped the spatula, lost her balance, hit the side of the sink and caught herself. She picked up the spatula, washed it in the sink, came back and turned the eggs over.

"I don't want breakfast," Barney said.

Shirley turned off all the burners and went back to the bedroom, went to bed. She heard him getting himself ready in the bathroom. She even hated the way he splashed water in the basin while he shaved. And when she heard the electric toothbrush the thought of the bristles in his mouth cleaning his teeth and his gums sickened her. Then there was the sound of hairspray. There was silence. Then the toilet flushed.

He came out. She heard him choosing a shirt from the closet. She heard his keys and his change rattle as he put on his pants. Then she felt the bed give way as he sat on the edge, putting on his stockings and his shoes. Then the bed rose as he stood up. She lay on her stomach, face down, eyes closed. She sensed him looking at her.

“Listen,” he said, “I just want to tell you one thing: if it’s another man, I’m going to kill you. Got it?”

Shirley didn’t answer. Then she felt his fingers around the back of her neck. He bounced her head hard up and down into the pillow. “*Answer me*! Got it? Got it? *You got it*?”

“Yes,” she said, “I’ve got it.”

He let go of her. He walked out of the bedroom and into the front room. She heard the door close, then heard him walk down the steps. The car was in the driveway, and she listened to it start. Then she heard the sound of it driving away. Then there was silence.

IN AND OUT AND OVER

The problem with an 11 a.m. arrival and an 8 p.m. poetry reading is that it sometimes reduces a man to something they lead on stage only to be looked at, jibed at, knocked down, which is what they want—not enlightenment, but entertainment.

Professor Kragmatz met me at the airport, I met his two dogs in the car, and I met Pulholtz (who had been reading my work for years) and two young students—one a karate expert and the other with a broken leg—back at Howard's house. (Howard was the professor who had issued the invitation for me to read.)

I sat glum and pious, drinking beer, and then almost everyone but Howard had a class to go to. Doors slammed and the dogs barked and left and the clouds darkened and Howard and I and his wife and a young male student sat around. Jacqueline, Howie's wife, played chess with the student.

"I got a new supply," said Howard. He opened his hand on a palm-full of pills. "No. It's my stomach," I said. "Bad shape lately."

At 8 p.m. I got up there. "He's drunk, he's drunk," I could hear the voices from the audience. I had my vodka and orange juice. I gave them an opening swallow to stir up their distaste. I read for an hour.

The applause was fair enough. A young boy came up, trembling. "Mr. Chinaski, I have got to tell you this: you are a beautiful man!" I shook his hand. "It's all right, kid, just keep buying my books." A few had some of my books and I made drawings in them. It was over. I had hustled my ass.

The post-reading party was the same as always, professors and students, bland and dim. Professor Kragmatz got me in the breakfast nook, began asking questions as the groupies slithered about. No, I told him, no, well, yes, parts of T. S. Eliot *were* good. We were too rough on Eliot. Pound, yes, well, we were finding out that Pound was not quite what we thought. No, I couldn't think of any outstanding contemporary American poets, sorry. Concrete poetry? Well, yes, concrete poetry was just like concrete anything else. What, Céline? An old crank with withered testicles. Only one good book, the first one. What? Yes, of course, it's enough. I mean, you haven't written even one have you? Why do I pick on Creeley? I don't anymore. Creeley's built a body of work, that's more than most of his critics have done. Yes, I drink, doesn't everybody? How the hell you going to make it otherwise? Women? Oh yes, women, oh yes, of course. You can't write about fireplugs and empty India ink bottles. Yes, I know about the red wheelbarrow in the rain. Look, Kragmatz, I don't want you to hog me entirely. I better move around…

I stayed and slept in the bottom half of a bunk bed under the boy who was the karate expert. I awakened him about 6 a.m. by scratching my hemorrhoids. A stink arose and the female dog who had slept with me all night began nuzzling. I turned on my back and went to sleep again.

When I awakened everybody was gone but Howie. I got up, took a bath, dressed, walked out to see him. He was very sick.

"My god, you're resilient," he said. "You've got the body of a 20-year-old."

"No speed, no bennies, very little hard stuff last night…only beer and grass. I lucked it," I told him.

I suggested some soft-boiled eggs. Howard put them on. It began to get dark. It seemed like midnight. Jacqueline phoned and said there was a tornado approaching from the north. It began hailing. We ate our eggs.

Then the poet for the next night's reading arrived with his girl friend and Kragmatz. Howard ran out into the yard and vomited up his eggs. The new poet, Blanding Edwards, began talking. He meant well. He talked about Ginsberg, Corso, Kerouac. Then Blanding Edwards and his girlfriend, Betty (who also wrote poetry), began talking to each other in rapid French.

It got darker, there was lightning, more hail, and the wind, the wind was awful. The beer came out. Kragmatz reminded Edwards to be careful, he had to read that night. Howard got onto his bicycle and pedaled off in the storm to go teach freshman English at the university. Jacqueline arrived. "Where's Howie?"

"He took his two wheels out into the tornado," I said.

"Is he all right?"

"He looked like a 17-year-old boy when he left. He took a couple of aspirin."

The remainder of the afternoon was waiting and trying to avoid literary talk. I got a ride to the airport. I had my $500 check and my satchel of poems. I told them to stay in the car and that someday I would send all of them a picture postcard.

I walked into the waiting room and I heard one guy say to another, "Look at *that* guy!" The natives all had the same hairstyle, the same buckles on their high-heeled shoes, lightweight overcoats, single-breasted suits with brass buttons, striped shirts, neckties that ran the gamut from gold to green. Even their faces were alike: the noses and ears and mouths and expressions were alike. Shallow lakes coated with thin ice. Our plane was late. I stood behind a coffee machine, drank two dark coffees and ate some crackers. Then I went out and stood in the rain.

We left after an hour and a half. The plane rocked and bucked. There was no *New Yorker* magazine. I asked the stewardess for a drink. She said there wasn't any ice. The pilot told us there would be a delay landing in Chicago. They couldn't get clearance. He was a man of truth. We reached Chicago and there was the airport and we circled and circled and circled and I said, “Well, I guess there’s nothing to do.” I ordered my third drink. The others began to get into the swing of it. Especially after both engines sputtered out at once. They started again and somebody laughed. We drank and we drank and we drank. After we were potted out of our lighttowers they told us they were going to land.

O’Hare again. The thin ice broke. People hustled about, asking obvious questions and getting obvious answers. I saw my flight had no departure time listed. It was 8:30 p.m. I phoned Ann. She said she’d keep calling L.A. International for the arrival time. She asked me how the reading had gone. I told her that it was very hard to fool a college poetry audience. I had only fooled about half of them. “Fine,” she said. “Never trust a man who wears a jump suit,” I told her.

I stood looking at the legs of a Japanese woman for 15 minutes. Then I found a bar. There was a black man in there dressed in a red leather outfit with a fur collar. They were giving it to him, laughing as if he was a bug crawling on the bar. They did it very well. It took centuries of practice. The black man was trying to be cool, but his back was rigid.

When I went to check the flight board again one-third of the airport was drunk. Hairstyles were coming undone. One man was walking backwards, very drunk, trying to fall on the back of his head and get himself a skull fracture. We all lit cigarettes and waited, watching, hoping he would give his head a damned good whack. I wondered which one of us would get his wallet. I watched him fall, then the horde swooped in to strip him. He was too far away to do me any good. I went back to the bar. The black man was gone. Two guys to my left were arguing. One of them turned to me. “What do you think of war?”

“There’s nothing wrong with war,” I said.

“Oh, yeah? Yeah?”

“Yeah. When you get into a taxi, that’s war. When you buy a loaf of bread, that’s war. When you buy a whore, that’s war.

Sometimes I need bread, taxis and whores."

"Hey, you guys," said the man, "here's a guy who *likes* war."

Another guy came down from the end of the bar. He was dressed like the others. "You like war?"

"There's nothing wrong with it; it's a natural extension of our society."

"How many years you been in?"

"None."

"Where you from?"

"L.A."

"Well, I lost my best buddy to a land mine. BAM! And he was gone."

"But for the grace of God it might have been you."

"Don't get funny."

"I've been drinking. Got a light?"

He put the lighter to the end of my cigarette with obvious distaste. Then he went back down to the end of the bar.

We left on the 7:15 at 11:15. We flew through the air. The poetry hustle was winding down. I'd hit Santa Anita on Friday and score a hundred, get back to the novel. The New York Philharmonic was featuring Ives on Sunday. There was a chance. I ordered another drink.

The lights went out. Nobody could sleep, but they all pretended. I didn't bother. I had a window seat and stared out at the wing and the lights below. Everything was arranged down there in nice straight lines. Ant nests.

We floated into L.A. International. Ann, I love you. I hope my car starts. I hope the sink isn't plugged up. I'm glad I didn't fuck a groupie. I'm glad I'm not very good at getting into bed with strange females. I'm glad I'm an idiot. I'm glad I don't know anything. I'm glad I haven't been murdered. When I look at my hands and they are still on my wrists, I think to myself, I am lucky.

I climbed out of the plane dragging my father's overcoat and my stash of poems. Ann came up to me. I saw her face and I thought, shit, I love her. What am I going to do? The best I could do was to act indifferent, then proceed with her to the parking lot. You must never let them know that you care or they will kill you. I leaned over, pecked her on the cheek. “Damned nice of you to come.” “It’s all right,” she said.

We drove out of L.A. International. I’d done my dirty gig. The poetry hustle. I never solicited. They wanted their whore: they had him. “Kid,” I told her, “I sure missed your ass.” “I’m hungry,” said Ann.

We got to the Chicano place at Alvarado and Sunset. We had green chili burritos. It was over. I still had a woman, a woman I cared for. Such magic is not to be taken casually. I looked at her hair and her face as we drove back home. I stole glances at her when I felt she was not looking.

“How’d the reading go?” she asked.

“The reading went all right,” I said.

We drove north up Alvarado. Then to Glendale Boulevard. Everything was good. What I hated was that someday everything would dwindle to zero, the loves, the poems, the gladiolas. Finally we’d be stuffed with dirt like a cheap taco.

Ann pulled into the driveway. We got up, went up the steps, opened the door and the dog leaped all over us. The moon stood up, the house smelled of lint and roses, the dog leaped upon me. I pulled his ears, punched him in the belly, his eyes opened wide and he grinned.

I LOVE YOU, ALBERT

Louie was sitting in the Red Peacock with a hangover. When the bartender brought him his drink he said, “There’s only one other person I’ve seen in this town who’s as crazy as you are.” “Yeh?” said Louie, “that’s nice. That’s damned nice.” “And she’s here right now,” continued the barkeep. “Yeh?” said Louie. “She’s the one down there in the blue dress with the beautiful body. But nobody will go near her because she’s crazy.” “Yeh?” said Louie.

Louie picked up his drink and walked over and sat on the stool next to the girl. “Hello,” said Louie. “Hello,” she said. Then they sat there side by side for quite a while without saying another word to each other.

Myra (that was her name) suddenly reached behind the bar and came up with a full mix bottle. She raised it over her head and made as if to throw it into the mirror behind the bar. Louie grabbed her arm and said, “No, no, no, no, my dear!” After that the bartender suggested that Myra leave and when she did Louie left with her.

Myra and Louie picked up three fifths of cheap whiskey and got on the bus going to Louie’s place, The Delsey Arms Apartments. Myra took off one of her shoes (high-heeled) and attempted to murder the bus driver. Louie restrained Myra with one arm and clutched the three fifths of whiskey with the other. They got off the bus and walked toward Louie’s place.

They got in the elevator and Myra began pressing the buttons. The elevator went up, it went down, it went up, it stopped, and

Myra kept asking, “Where do you live?” And Louie kept repeating, “Fourth floor, apartment number four.”

Myra kept pushing buttons while the elevator went up and down. “Listen,” she finally said, “we’ve been on this thing for years. I’m sorry but I’ve got to piss.” “O.K.,” said Louie, “let’s make a deal. You let me work the buttons and I’ll let you piss.”

“Done,” she said, and she pulled her panties down, squatted and did the deed. As he watched it trickle across the floor Louie punched the “4” button. They arrived. By then Myra had straightened, pulled up her panties, and was ready to exit.

They went inside Louie’s place and began opening bottles. Myra was best at that. They sat facing each other across 10 or 12 feet of space. Louie sat in the chair by the window and Myra sat on the couch. Myra had a fifth and Louie had a fifth and they began.

Fifteen or 20 minutes passed and then Myra noticed some empty bottles on the floor near the couch. She began picking them up, squinting her eyes and throwing the empty bottles at Louie’s head. She missed with all of them. Some of them went out the open window behind Louie’s head; some of them hit the wall and broke; others bounced off the wall, miraculously not breaking. These Myra retrieved and winged at him again. Soon Myra was out of bottles.

Louie got out of his chair and climbed onto the roof outside his window. He walked about gathering up the bottles. When he had an armload he climbed back through the window and brought them to Myra, set them at her feet. Then he sat down, lifted his fifth and continued to drink. The bottles began coming at him again. He had another drink, then another drink, then he remembered no more…

In the morning Myra awakened first, climbed out of bed, put on coffee, and brought Louie a coffee royal. “Come on,” she told him, “I want you to meet my friend Albert. Albert is a very special person.”

Louie drank his coffee royal, then they made love. It was good. Louie had a very large knot over his left eye. He got out of bed and dressed. "O.K.," he said, "let's go."

They took the elevator down, walked to Alvarado Street and caught the bus running north. They rode along quietly for five minutes and then Myra reached up and pulled the cord. They got off, walked half a block, then entered an old brown apartment house. They walked up one flight of stairs, around a bend in the the hall, and Myra stopped at Room 203. She knocked. Footsteps could be heard and the door opened. "Hello, Albert." "Hello, Myra." "Albert, I want you to meet Louie. Louie, this is Albert." They shook hands.

Albert had four hands. He also had four arms to go with them. The top two arms had sleeves and the bottom two arms hung out of holes cut in the shirt.

"Come on in," said Albert. In one of his hands Albert held a drink, a scotch and water. In another hand he held a cigarette. In the third hand he held a newspaper. The fourth hand, the one that had shook Louie's hand, was not occupied with anything. Myra went to the kitchen, got a glass, poured Louie a shot from the bottle in her purse. Then she sat down and began to drink out of the bottle.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"Sometimes you just hit the bottom of terror, you give up, and you still don't die," said Louie.

"Albert raped the fat lady," Myra explained. "You should have seen him with all those arms around her. You were a sight, Albert."

Albert groaned and looked depressed.

"Albert drank himself out of the circus, raped and drank himself right out of the god-damned circus. Now he's on relief."

"Somehow I could never fit into society. I am unfond of humanity. I have no desire to conform, no sense of loyalty, no real purpose."

Albert walked over to the telephone. He held the telephone in one hand, the Daily Racing Form in the second hand, a cigarette in the third and a drink in the fourth.

"Jack? Yeh. This is Albert. Listen, I want Crunchy Main, two win in the first. Give me Blazing Lord, two across in the fourth. Hammerhead Justice, five win in the seventh. And give me Noble Flake, five win and five place in the ninth."

Albert hung up. "My body gnaws at me from one side and my spirit gnaws at me from the other."

"How you doing at the track, Albert?" asked Myra.

"I'm 40 bucks ahead. I got a new play. I figured it out one night when I couldn't sleep. The whole thing opened up to me like a book. If I get any better they won't take my action. Of course I could always go to the track and place my bets there, but…"

"But what, Albert?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake…"

"What do you mean, Albert?"

"I MEAN PEOPLE STARE! FOR CHRIST'S SAKE DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"Sorry, Albert."

"Don't be sorry. I don't want your pity!"

"All right. No pity."

"I oughta slap the shit out of you for being so dumb."

"I'll bet you could slap the shit out of me. All those hands."

"Don't tempt me," said Albert.

He finished his drink and walked over and mixed himself another. Then he sat down. Louie hadn't said anything. He felt that he should say something.

"You oughta get into boxing, Albert. Those two extra hands—you'd be a terror."

"Don't be funny, asshole."

Myra poured Louie another drink. They sat around not talking for a while. Then Albert looked up. He looked at Myra. "You fucking this guy?"

"No, I'm not, Albert. I love you, you know that."

"I don't know anything."

"You know I love you, Albert." Myra walked over and sat on Albert's lap. "You're so touchy. I don't pity you, Albert, I love you."

She kissed him.

"I love you, too, baby," said Albert.

"More than any other woman?"

"More than *all* the other women!"

They kissed again. It was a terribly long kiss. That is, it was a terribly long kiss for Louie who sat there with his drink. He reached up and touched the large knot above his left eye. Then his bowels twisted a bit and he went to the bathroom and had a long slow crap.

When he came out Myra and Albert were standing in the center of the room, kissing. Louie sat down and picked up Myra's bottle and watched. While the two top arms held Myra in an embrace the bottom two hands lifted Myra's dress up to her waist and then worked inside her panties. As the panties came down Louie took another drag from the bottle, set it on the floor, got up, walked to the door, and walked out.

Back at the Red Peacock Louie went to his favorite stool and sat down. The barkeep walked up.

"Well, Louie, how did you make out?"

"Make out?"

"With the lady."

"With the lady?"

"You left together, man. Did you get her?"

"No, not really…

"What went wrong?"

"What went wrong?"

"Yes, what went wrong?"

"Give me a whiskey sour, Billy."

Billy walked over and fixed the drink. He brought it back to Louie. Neither of them spoke. Billy walked down to the other end of the bar and stood there. Louie lifted his drink and drank half of it. It was a good drink. He lit a cigarette and held it in one hand. He held the drink in the other hand. The sun was coming in through the door from the street. There was no smog outside. It was going to be a nice day. It was going to be a nicer day than yesterday.

WHITE DOG HUNCH

Henry took the pillow and bunched it behind his back and waited. Louise came in with toast, marmalade and coffee. The toast was buttered.

"Are you sure you don't want a couple of soft-boiled eggs?" she asked.

"No, it's O.K. This is fine."

"You should have a couple of eggs."

"All right, then."

Louise left the bedroom. He'd been up earlier to go to the bathroom and noticed his clothes had been hung up. Something Lita would never do. And Louise was an excellent fuck. No children. He loved the way she did things, softly, carefully. Lita was always on the attack—all hard edges. When Louise came back with the eggs he asked her, "What was it?"

"What was what?"

"You even peeled the eggs. I mean, why did your husband divorce you?"

"Oh, wait," she said, "the coffee is boiling!" and she ran from the room.

He could listen to classical music with her. She played the piano. She had books: *The Savage God* by Alvarez; *The Life of Picasso*; E. B. White; e. e. cummings; T. S. Eliot; Pound; Ibsen, and on and on. She even had nine of his *own* books. Maybe that was the best part.

Louise returned and got into bed, put her plate on her lap. "What went wrong with *your* marriage?"

"Which one? There've been five!"

“The last. Lita.”

“Oh. Well, unless Lita was in *motion* she didn’t think anything was happening. She liked dancing and parties, her whole life revolved around dancing and parties. She liked what she called ‘getting high.’ That meant men. She claimed I restricted her ‘highs.’ She said I was jealous.”

“Did you restrict her?”

“I suppose so, but I tried not to. During the last party I went into the backyard with my beer and let her carry on. There was a houseful of men, I could hear her in there squealing, ‘*Yeehooo! Yee Hoo! Yee Hoo*!’ I suppose she was just a natural country girl.”

“You could have danced too.”

“I suppose so. Sometimes I did. But they turn the stereo up so high that you can’t think. I went out into the yard. I went back for some beer and there was a guy kissing her under the stairway. I walked out until they were finished, then went back again for the beer. It was dark but I thought it had been a friend and later I asked him what he was doing under the stairway there.”

“Did she love you?”

“She said she did.”

“You know, kissing and dancing isn’t so bad.”

“I suppose not. But you’d have to see her. She had a way of dancing as if she were offering herself as a sacrifice. For rape. It was very effective. The men loved it. She was 33 years old with two children.”

“She didn’t realize you were a solitary. Men have different natures.”

“She never considered my nature. Like I say, unless she was in motion, or turning on, she didn’t think anything was happening. Otherwise she was bored. ‘Oh, this bores me or that bores me. Eating breakfast with you bores me. Watching you write bores me. I need challenges.’”

“That doesn’t seem completely wrong.”

“I suppose not. But you know, only boring people get bored. They have to prod themselves continually in order to feel alive."

"Like your drinking, for instance?"

"Yes, like my drinking. I can't face life straight on either."

"Was that all there was to the problem?"

"No, she was a nymphomaniac but didn't know it. She claimed I satisfied her sexually but I doubt if I satisfied her spiritual nymphomania. She was the second nymph I had lived with. She had fine qualities aside from that, but her nymphomania was embarrassing. Both to me and to my friends. They'd take me aside and say, 'What the hell's the matter with her?' And I'd say, 'Nothing, she's just a country girl.'"

"Was she?"

"Yes. But the other part was embarrassing."

"More toast?"

"No, this is fine."

"What was embarrassing?"

"Her behavior. If there was another man in the room she'd sit as close to him as possible. He would duck down to put out a cigarette in an ashtray on the floor, she'd duck down too. Then he'd turn his head to look at something and she'd do the same thing."

"Was it a coincidence?"

"I used to think so. But it happened too often. The man would get up to walk across the room and she'd get up and walk right alongside of him. Then when he walked back across the room she'd follow right by his side. The incidents were continuous and numerous, and like I say, embarrassing to both me and my friends. And yet I'm sure she didn't know what she was doing, it all came from the subconscious."

"When I was a girl there was a woman in the neighborhood with this 15-year-old daughter. The daughter was uncontrollable. The mother would send her out for a loaf of bread and she'd come back eight hours later with the bread but meanwhile she would have fucked six men."

"I guess the mother should have baked her own bread."

"I suppose so. The girl couldn't help herself. Whenever she saw a man she'd start to jiggle all over. The mother finally had her spayed."

"Can they do that?"

"Yes, but you have to go through all kinds of legal procedures. There was nothing else to do with her. She'd have been pregnant all her life.

"Do you have anything against dancing?" Louise continued.

"Most people dance for joy, out of good feeling. She crossed over into dirty areas. One of her favorite dances was The White Dog Hunch. A guy would wrap both his legs around her leg and hump her like a male dog in heat. Another of her favorites was The Drunk Dance. She and her partner would end up on the floor rolling over on top of each other."

"She said you were jealous of her dancing?"

"That was the word she used most often: jealous."

"I used to dance in high school."

"Yeah? Listen, thanks for breakfast."

"It's all right. I had a partner in high school. We were the best dancers in school. He had three balls; I thought it was a sign of masculinity."

"Three balls?"

"Yes, three balls. Anyhow, we really knew how to dance. I'd signal by touching him on the wrist, then we'd both leap and turn in the air, very high, and land on our feet. One time we were dancing, I touched his wrist and I made my leap and turn, but I didn't land on my feet. I landed on my ass. He put his hand over his mouth and stared down at me and said, 'Oh, good heavens!' and he walked off. He didn't pick me up. He was a homosexual. We never danced again."

"Do you have something against three-balled homosexuals?"

"No, but we never danced again."

"Lita, she was really dance-obsessed. She'd go into strange bars and ask men to dance with her. Of course, they would. They thought she was an easy fuck. I don't know if she did or didn't. I suppose that sometimes she did. The trouble with men who dance or hang out in bars is that their perception is on a parallel with the tape worm."

"How did you know that?"

"They're caught in the ritual."

"What ritual?"

"The ritual of misdirected energy."

Henry got up and began to dress. "Kid, I got to get going."

"What is it?"

"I just have to get some work done. I'm supposed to be a writer."

"There's a play by Ibsen on tv tonight. 8:30. Will you come over?"

"Sure. I left that pint of scotch. Don't drink it all."

Henry got into his clothes and went down the stairway and got into his car and drove to his place and his typewriter. Second floor rear. Every day as he typed, the woman downstairs would beat on her ceiling with the broom. He wrote the hard way, it had always been the hard way: *The White Dog Hunch…*

Louise phoned at 5:30 p.m. She'd been at the scotch. She was drunk. She slurred her words. She rambled. The reader of Thomas Chatterton and D. H. Lawrence. The reader of nine of his books.

"Henry?"

"Yes?"

"Oh, something marvelous has happened!"

"Yes?"

"This black boy came to see me. He's *beautiful*! He's more beautiful than you…"

"Of course."

"…more beautiful than you and I."

"Yes."

"He got me so excited! I'm about to go out of my mind!"

"Yes."

"You don't mind?"

"No."

"You know how we spent the afternoon?"

"No."

"Reading *your poems*!"

"Oh?"

"And you know what he said?"

"No."

"He said your poems were *great*!"

"That's O.K."

"Listen, he got me so *excited*. I don't know how to handle it. Won't you come over? Now? I want to see you now…"

"Louise, I'm working…"

"Listen, you don't have anything against black men?"

"No."

"I've known this boy for ten years. He used to work for me when I was rich."

"You mean when you were still with your rich husband."

"Will I see you later? Ibsen is on at 8:30."

"I'll let you know."

"Why did that bastard come around? I was all right and then he came around. Christ. I'm so excited, I've got to see you. I'm about to go crazy. He was so *beautiful*."

"I'm working, Louise. The word around here is 'Rent.' Try to understand."

Louise hung up. She called again at 8:20 about Ibsen. Henry said he was still working. He was. Then he began to drink and just sat in a chair, he just sat in a chair. At 9:50 there was a knock on the door. It was Booboo Meltzer, the number one rock star of 1970, currently unemployed, still living off royalties. "Hello, kid," said Henry.

Meltzer walked in and sat down.

"Man," he said, "you're a beautiful old cat. I can't get over you."

"Lay off, kid, cats are out of style, dogs are in now."

"I got a hunch you need help, old man."

"Kid, it's never been different."

Henry walked into the kitchen, found two beers, cracked them and walked out.

"I'm out of cunt, kid, which to me is like being out of love. I can't separate them. I'm not that clever."

"None of us are clever, Pops. We all need help."

"Yeh."

Meltzer had a small celluloid tube. Carefully he tapped out two little white spots on the coffee table.

"This is cocaine, Pops, *cocaine*…"

"Ah, hah."

Meltzer reached into his pocket, pulled out a $50 bill, rolled the 50 tightly, then worked it up one nostril. Pressing a finger on the other nostril he bent over one of the white spots on the coffee table and inhaled it. Then he took the $50 bill, worked it up the other nostril and sniffed the second white spot.

"Snow," said Meltzer.

"It's Christmas. Appropriate," said Henry.

Meltzer tapped out two more white spots and passed the fifty. Henry said, "Hold it, I'll use my own," and he found a $1 bill and sniffed up. Once for each nostril "What do you think of *The White Dog Hunch*?" asked Henry.

"This is 'The White Dog Hunch,'" said Meltzer, tapping out two more spots.

"God," said Henry, "I don't think I'll ever be bored again. You're not bored with me, are you?"

"No way," said Meltzer, sniffing it up through the $50 with all his might. "Pops, there's just no way…"

LONG DISTANCE DRUNK

The phone rang at 3 a.m. Francine got up and answered it and brought the phone to Tony in bed. It was Francine's phone. Tony answered. It was Joanna long distance from Frisco. "Listen," he said, "I told you never to phone me here." Joanna had been drinking. "You just shut up and listen to me. You *owe* me something, Tony." Tony exhaled slowly, "O.K., go ahead."

"How's Francine?"

"Nice of you to ask. She's fine. We're both fine. We were asleep."

"Well, anyhow, I got hungry and went for pizza, I went to a pizza parlor."

"Yeh?"

"You've got something against pizza?"

"Pizza is garbage."

"Ah, you don't know what's good. Anyhow, I sat down in the pizza parlor and ordered special pizza. 'Give me the very best,' I told them. I sat there and they brought it and said $18. I said I couldn't pay $18. They laughed and went away and I began to eat the pizza."

"How are your sisters?"

"I don't live with either of them anymore. They both ran me out. It was those long-distance phone calls to you. Some of the phone bills ran over $200."

"I've told you to stop phoning."

"Shut up. It's my way of letting myself down easy. You *owe* me something."

"All right, go ahead."

"Well, anyhow, I got to eating the pizza and wondering how I was going to pay for it. Then I got dry. I needed a beer so I took the pizza to the bar and ordered a beer. I drank that and ate some of the pizza and then I noticed a tall Texan standing next to me. He must have been seven feet tall. He bought me a beer. He was playing music on the juke box and it was country western. It was a country western place. You don't like country western music, do you?"

"It's pizza I dislike."

"Anyhow, I gave the tall Texan some of my pizza and he bought me another beer. We kept drinking beer and eating pizza until the pizza was finished. He paid for the pizza and we went to another bar. Country western again. We danced. He was a good dancer. We drank and kept hitting country western bars. Every bar we went to was country western. We drank beer and danced. He was a great dancer."

"Yes?"

"Finally we got hungry again and we went to a drive-in for a hamburger. We ate our hamburgers and then suddenly he leaned over and kissed me. It was a hot kiss. Wow!"

"Oh?"

"I told him, 'Hell, let's go to a motel.' And he said, 'No, let's go to my place.' And I said, 'No, I want to go to a motel.' But he insisted upon going to his place."

"Was there a wife?"

"No, his wife was in prison. She'd shot and killed one of their daughters, a 17-year-old."

"I see."

"Well, he had one daughter left. She was 16 and he introduced me to his daughter, and then we went into his bedroom."

"Do I have to listen to the details?"

"Let me *talk*! I'm paying for this call. I've paid for *all* these calls! You owe me something, you listen to me!"

"Go ahead."

"Well, we got into the bedroom and stripped down. He was really hung but his pecker looked terribly blue."

"It's when the balls are blue, there's trouble."

"Anyhow, we climbed into bed and played around. But there was a problem…"

"Too drunk?"

"Yes. But mainly it was that he only got hot when his daughter came into the room or made a noise—like coughing or flushing the toilet. Any glimpse or sign of his daughter would turn him on, he'd really get hot."

"I understand."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Anyhow, in the morning he told me that I had a home for life if I wanted it. Plus a $300-a-week allowance. He has a very nice place: two-and-one-half bathrooms, three or four tv sets, a bookcase full of books: Pearl S. Buck, Agatha Christie, Shakespeare, Proust, Hemingway, the Harvard Classics, hundreds of cookbooks and the Bible. He has two dogs, a cat, three cars…"

"Yes?"

"That's all I wanted to tell you. Goodbye."

Joanna hung up. Tony put the receiver back in the cradle, then set the phone on the floor. Tony stretched out. He hoped Francine was asleep. She wasn't. "What'd she want?" she asked.

"She told me a story about a man who fucked his daughters."

"Why? Why should she tell you that?"

"I suppose she thought I'd be interested, plus the fact that she fucked him too."

"Are you?"

"Not really."

Francine turned over to him and he slipped his arm around her. Three a.m. drunks, all over America, were staring at the walls, having finally given it up. You didn't have to be a drunk to get hurt, to be zeroed out by a woman; but you could get hurt and become a drunk. You might think for a while, especially when you were young, that luck was with you, and sometimes it was. But there were all manner of averages and laws working that you knew nothing about, even as you imagined things were going well. Some night, some hot summer Thursday night, *you* became the drunk, *you* were out there alone in a cheap rented room, and no matter how many times you'd been out there before, it was no help, it was even worse because you had got to thinking you wouldn't have to face it again. All you could do was light another cigarette, pour another drink, check the peeling walls for lips and eyes. What men and women did to each other was beyond comprehension.

Tony drew Francine closer to him, pressed his body quietly against hers and listened to her breathe. It was horrible to have to be serious about shit like this once again.

Los Angeles was so strange. He listened. The birds were already up, chirping, yet it was pitch dark. Soon the people would be heading for the freeways. You'd hear the freeways hum, plus cars starting everywhere on the streets. Meanwhile the 3 a.m. drunks of the world would lay in their beds, trying in vain to sleep, and deserving that rest, if they could find it.

HOW TO GET PUBLISHED

Having been an underground writer all of my life I have known some strange editors but the strangest of them all was H. R. Mulloch and his wife, Honeysuckle. Mulloch, ex-con and ex-diamond thief, was editor of the magazine, *Demise*. I began to send him poetry and a correspondence ensued. He claimed my poetry had ruined him for everybody else's poetry; and I wrote back and said it had ruined me for everybody else's poetry, too. H.R. began talking about the possibilities of putting out a book of my poems and I said okay, fine, go ahead. He wrote back, I can't pay royalties, we're as poor as a church mouse. I wrote back, okay, fine, forget royalties, I'm as poor as a church mouse's shriveled titty. He replied, wait a minute, most writers, well, I meet them and they are complete assholes and horrible human beings. I wrote back, you're right, I'm a complete asshole and a horrible human being. O.K., he answered, me and Honeysuckle are coming to L.A. to check you out.

The phone rang a week and a half later. They were in town, just in from New Orleans, staying in a Third Street hotel filled with prostitutes, winos, pickpockets, second story men, dishwashers, muggers, stranglers and rapists. Mulloch loved the low-life, and I think he even loved poverty. From his letters I got the idea that H.R. believed that poverty bred purity. Of course, that's what the rich have always wanted us to believe, but that's another story.

I got in the car with Marie and we drove on down, first stopping for three six-packs and a fifth of cheap whiskey. There was a little grey-haired man about five feet tall standing outside. He was dressed in workingman’s blues but with a bandanna (white) about his throat. On his head he wore a very tall white sombrero. Marie and I walked up. He was puffing on a cigarette and smiling. “You Chinaski?” “Yeh.” I said, “and this is Marie, my woman.” “No man,” he answered, “can ever call a woman his own. We never own ’em, we only borrow ’em for a little while.” “Yeh,” I said, “I guess that’s best.” We followed H.R. up the stairway down a hall painted blue and red that smelled of murder.

“Only hotel in town we could find that would take the dogs, a parrot, and the two of us.”

“Looks like a nice place,” I said.

He opened his door and we walked in. There were two dogs in there running around, and Honeysuckle was standing in the center of the room with a parrot on her shoulder.

“Thomas Wolfe,” said the parrot, “is the world’s greatest living writer.”

“Wolfe’s dead,” I said. “Your parrot is wrong.”

“It’s an old parrot,” said H.R. “We’ve had him a long time.”

“How long have you been with Honeysuckle?”

“Thirty years.”

“Just borrowed her for a while?”

“That’s the way it seems.”

The dogs ran around and Honeysuckle stood in the center of the room with the parrot on her shoulder. She looked dark, Italian or Greek, very skinny, with pouches under her eyes; she looked tragic and kind and dangerous, mostly tragic. I put the whiskey and beer on the table and everybody moved forward toward it. H.R. began ripping off beercaps and I started peeling the whiskey. Dusty drinking glasses appeared along with several ashtrays. Through the wall to the left, a male voice suddenly boomed, “You fuckin’ whore I want you to eat my shit!”

We sat down and I splashed the whiskey around. H.R. passed me a cigar. I peeled it, bit off the end and lit up.

"What'cha think of modern literature?" H.R. asked me.

"Don't really care for it."

H.R. narrowed his eyes and grinned at me. "Ha, I thought so!"

"Listen," I said, "why don't you take off that sombrero so I can see who I'm dealing with. You might be a horse thief."

"No," he said, sweeping the sombrero off with a dramatic gesture, "but I was one of the best diamond thieves in the state of Ohio."

"Is that so?"

"It is."

The girls were drinking away. "I just love my dogs," said Honeysuckle. "Do you love dogs?" she asked me.

"I don't know if I love them or not."

"He loves himself," said Marie.

"Marie has a very penetrating mind," I said.

"I like the way you write," said H.R. "You can say a lot without getting fancy."

"Genius might be the ability to say a profound thing in a simple way."

"What's that?" H.R. asked.

I repeated the statement and splashed more whiskey around.

"I gotta write that down," said H.R. He pulled a pen from his pocket and wrote it down on the edge of one of the brown paper bags laying on the table.

The parrot climbed off Honeysuckle's shoulder, walked across the table and climbed up on my left shoulder. "That's nice," said Honeysuckle. "James Thurber," said the bird, "is the world's greatest living writer." "Dumb bastard," I said to the bird. I felt a sharp pain in my left ear. The bird had almost torn it off. We are all such sensitive creatures. H.R. ripped off more beercaps. We drank on.

Afternoon became evening and evening became night. I awakened in the dark. I had been sleeping on the rug in the center of the floor. H.R. and Honeysuckle were asleep in the bed. Marie was asleep on the couch. All three of them snored, especially Marie. I got up and sat at the table. There was some whiskey left. I poured it and drank a warm beer. I sat there and drank some more warm beer. The parrot sat on the back of a chair across from me. Suddenly he climbed down and walked across the table between the ashtrays and empty bottles and climbed up on my shoulder. “Don’t say that thing,” I told him, “it’s very irritating to me when you say that thing.” “Fuckin’ whore,” said the parrot. I lifted the bird by its feet and placed him back on the chair. Then I got back down on the rug and went to sleep.

In the morning, H.R. Mulloch made an announcement. “I’ve decided to print a book of your poems. We might as well go home and get to work.”

“You mean you realized I’m not a horrible human being?”

“No,” said H.R., “I didn’t realize that at all, but I’ve decided to ignore my better judgment and print you anyhow.”

“Were you really the best diamond thief in the state of Ohio?”

“Oh, yes.”

“I know you did time. How’d you get caught?”

“It was so stupid I don’t want to talk about it.”

I went down and got a couple more six packs and came back and Marie and I helped H.R. and Honeysuckle pack. There were special carrying cases for the dogs and the parrot. We got everything down the stairway and into my car, then we sat and finished the beer. We were all pros: nobody was foolish enough to suggest breakfast.

“You come out and see us now,” said H.R. “We’re going to be putting the book together. You’re a son of a bitch but a man can talk to you. Those other poets, they’re always flaunting their feathers and putting on a dumb asshole act.”

“You’re okay,” said Honeysuckle. “The dogs like you.”

“And the parrot,” said H.R.

The girls stayed in the car and I went back with H.R. while he turned in his key. An old woman in a green kimono, her hair dyed a bright red, opened the door.

“This is Mama Stafford,” H.R. said to me. “Mama Stafford, this is the world’s greatest poet.”

“Really?” asked Mama.

“The world’s greatest living poet,” I said.

“Why don’t you boys come in for a drink? You look like you need one.”

We went in and each of us forced down a glass of warm white wine. We said goodbye and went back to the car…

At the train station, H.R. got the tickets and checked in the parrot and dogs at the baggage counter. Then he came back and sat down with us. “Hate flying,” he said. “Terrified of flying.” I went and got a half pint and we passed it around waiting. Then they started loading the train. We stood around on the platform and suddenly Honeysuckle leaped on me and gave me a long kiss. Toward the end of the kiss she passed her tongue rapidly in and out of my mouth. I stood and lit a cigar while Marie kissed H.R. Then H.R. and Honeysuckle climbed into the train.

“He’s a nice man,” said Marie.

“Sweetie,” I said, “I think you gave him rocks.”

“Are you jealous?”

“I’m always jealous.”

“Look, they’re sitting at the window, they’re smiling at us.”

“It’s embarrassing. I wish the fucking train would pull out.”

Finally the train did begin to pull out. We waved, of course, and they waved back. H.R. had a pleased and happy grin. Honeysuckle seemed to be crying. She looked quite tragic. Then we couldn’t see them anymore. It was over. I was about to be published. Selected Poems. We turned and walked back through the train station.

SPIDER

When I rang he was on his sixth or seventh beer and I walked to the refrigerator and got one for myself. Then I came out and sat down. He looked really low.

“What is it, Max?”

“I just lost one. She left a couple of hours ago.”

“I don’t know what to say, Max.”

He looked up from his beer. “Listen, I know you’re not going to believe this, but I haven’t had a piece of ass in four years.”

I sucked at my beer. “I believe you, Max. In fact, in our society there are a great number of people who go from cradle to grave without any ass at all. They sit in tiny rooms and make objects out of tinfoil which they hang in the window and watch while the sun glints on them, watch them twist in the wind…”

“Well, I just lost one. And she was right here…”

“Tell me about it.”

“Well, the doorbell rang and there stood a young girl, blonde, in a white dress with blue shoes, and she said, ‘Are you Max Miklovik?’ I told her I was and she said she had read my shit and would I let her in? I told her I would, really, and I let her in and she walked over to a chair in the corner and sat down. I walked into the kitchen and poured two whiskey and waters, walked back out, gave her one and then walked over and sat on the couch.”

“A looker?” I asked.

“A real looker and a good body, that dress didn’t hide a thing. Then she asked me, ‘You ever read Jerzy Kosinski?’ ‘I read his

Painted Bird,' I said. 'A terrible writer.' 'He's a very good writer,' she said."

Max just sat there, thinking about Kosinski, I guess. "Then what happened?" I asked.

"There was a spider weaving a web up above her. She gave a little scream. She said, 'That spider shit on me!'"

"Did it?"

"I told her that spiders didn't shit. She said, 'Yes, they do.' And I said, 'Jerzy Kosinski's a spider,' and she said, 'My name's Lyn,' and I said, 'Hello, Lyn.'"

"Some conversation."

"Some conversation. Then she said, 'I want to tell you something.' And I said, 'Go ahead.' And she said, 'I was taught to play the piano at the age of 13 by a real count, I saw his papers, he was legitimate, a real count. Count Rudolph Stauffer.' 'Drink up, drink up,' I told her."

"Can I have another beer, Max?"

"Sure, bring me one."

When I came back he continued. "She finished her drink and I went over to get her glass. As I reached for her glass I leaned over to kiss her. She pulled away. 'Shit, what's a kiss?' I asked her. 'Spiders kiss.'"

"'Spiders don't kiss,' she said. There was nothing to do but go in and mix two more drinks, a bit stronger. I came out, handed Lyn a drink and sat down on the couch again."

"I suppose you both should have been on the couch," I said.

"But we weren't. And she went on talking. 'The Count,' she said, 'had a high forehead, hazel eyes, pink hair, long thin fingers and he always smelled of semen.'"

"Ah."

"She said, 'He was 65 but he was hot. He taught my mother the piano too. My mother was 35 and I was 13 and he taught us both the piano.'"

"What were you supposed to say to that?" I asked.

"I don't know. So I told her, 'Kosinski can't write shit.' And she said, 'He made love to my mother.' And I said, 'Who? Kosinski?'

And she said, ‘No, the Count.’ ‘Did the Count fuck you?’ I asked her. And she said, ‘No, he never fucked me. But he touched me in various places, he made me very excited. And he played *marvelous* piano.’”

“How did you respond to all that?”

“Well, I told her about the time I worked for the Red Cross during the Second World War. We went around and collected bottles of blood. There was a nurse there, black hair, very fat, and after lunch she’d lay on the lawn with her legs opened toward me. She’d stare and stare. After we collected the blood I’d take the bottles to the storage room. It was cold in there and the bottles were kept in little white sacks and sometimes when I handed them to the girl in charge of the storage room a bottle would slip out of its sack and break on the floor. SPOW! Blood and glass everywhere. But the girl always said, ‘That’s all right, don’t worry about it.’ I thought she was very kind and I took to kissing her when I delivered the blood. It was very nice kissing her inside that refrigerator but I never got anywhere with the one with black hair who laid on the grass after lunch and opened her legs at me.”

“You told her that?”

“I told her that.”

“And what did she say?”

“She said, ‘That spider’s coming down! It’s coming down on me!’ ‘O, my god,’ I said and I grabbed the *Racing Form* and opened it and caught the spider between the third race for maiden three-year-olds at six furlongs and the fourth race which was a five thousand dollar claimer for four-year-olds-and-up at a mile-and-one-sixteenth. I threw the paper down and managed to give Lyn a quick kiss. She didn’t respond.”

“What did she say about the kiss?”

“She said that her father was a genius in the computer industry and he was seldom home but somehow he found out about her mother and the Count. He got hold of her one day after school and took her head and beat it against the wall, asking her why she had covered up for her mother. It made her father very angry when he found out the truth. He finally stopped beating her head against the wall and went in and beat her mother's head against the wall. She said it was horrible and they never saw the Count again."

"What did you say to that?"

"I told her that once I met this woman in a bar and I took her home. When she took off her panties there was so much blood and shit in them that I couldn't do it. She smelled like an oil well. She gave me a back rub with olive oil and I gave her five dollars, a half bottle of stale port wine, the address of my best friend and I sent her on her way."

"Did that really happen?"

"Yeah. Then this Lyn asked me if I liked T. S. Eliot. I told her I didn't. Then she said, 'I like your writing, Max, it's so ugly and demented that it fascinates me. I was in love with you. I wrote you letter after letter but you never answered.' 'Sorry, baby,' I said. She said, 'I went crazy. I went to Mexico. I got religion. I wore a black shawl and went singing in the streets at 3 a.m. Nobody bothered me. I had all your books in my suitcase and I drank tequila and lit candles. Then I met this matador and he made me forget you. It lasted several weeks.'"

"Those guys get plenty of pussy."

"I know," Max said. "Anyhow, she said they finally got tired of each other and I said, 'Let me be your matador.' And she said, 'You're like every other man. All you want to do is fuck.' 'Suck and fuck,' I told her. I walked over to her. 'Kiss me,' I said. 'Max,' she said, 'all you want to do is to play. You don't care for *me*.' 'I care for me,' I answered. 'If you weren't such a great writer,' she said, 'no woman would even talk to you.' 'Let's fuck,' I said. 'I want you to marry me,' she said. 'I don't want to marry you,' I said. She picked up her purse and walked out."

"That's the end of the story?" I asked.

"That's it," said Max, "no ass in four years and I lose that one. Pride, stupidity, whatever."

"You're a good writer, Max, but you're no ladies' man."

"You think a good ladies' man could have worked it?"

"Sure, you see each of her gambits must be parried with the correct response. Each correct response turns the conversation in a new direction until the ladies' man has the woman backed into a corner or, more properly, flat upon her back."

"How can I learn?"

"There's no learning. It's an instinct. You have to know what a woman is really saying when she is saying something else. It can't be taught."

"What did she really say?"

"She wanted you but you didn't know how to get to her. You couldn't build a bridge. You flopped, Max."

"But she'd read all my books. She thought I knew something."

"*Now* she knows something."

"What?"

"That you're a dumb ass, Max."

"Am I?"

"All writers are dumb asses. That's why they write things down."

"What do you mean, 'That's why they write things down'?"

"I mean, they write things down because they don't understand them."

"I write a lot of things down," said Max sadly.

"I remember when I was a kid I read this book by Hemingway. A guy climbed into bed with this woman again and again and he couldn't do it although he loved the woman and she loved him. My god, I thought, what a great book. All these centuries and nobody has written about this aspect of the thing. I thought the guy was just too blissfully dumb-ass to do it. Later on I read in the book that he'd had his genitals shot off in the war. What a let-down."

"You think that girl will be back?" Max asked me. "You should have seen that body, that face, those eyes."

"She won't be back," I said, standing up.

"But what'll I do?" asked Max.

"Just go on writing your pitiful poems and stories and novels…"

I left him there and walked down the stairway. There was no more I could say to him. It was 7:45 p.m. and I hadn't had dinner. I got into my car and drove over toward McDonald's, thinking that I'd probably go for the fried shrimp.

THE DEATH OF THE FATHER I

My father's funeral was a cold hamburger. I sat across from the funeral parlor in Alhambra and had a coffee. It would be a short drive to the race track after it was over. A man with a terrible peeling face, very round glasses with thick lenses, walked in. "Henry," he said to me, then sat down and ordered a coffee.

"Hello, Bert."

"Your father and I became very good friends. We talked about you a lot."

"I didn't like my old man," I said.

"Your father loved you, Henry. He was hoping you'd marry Rita." Rita was Bert's daughter. "She's going with the *nicest* guy now but he doesn't excite her. She seems to go for phonies. I don't understand. But she must like him a little," he said, brightening up, "because she hides her baby in the closet when he comes by."

"Come on, Bert, let's go."

We walked across the street and into the funeral parlor. Somebody was saying what a good man my father had been. I felt like telling them the other part. Then somebody sang. We stood and filed past the coffin. I was last. Maybe I'll spit on him, I thought.

My mother was dead. I had buried her the year before, gone to the race track and got laid afterwards. The line moved. Then a woman screamed. "No, no, no! He can't be dead!" She reached down into the casket, lifted his head and kissed him. Nobody stopped her. Her lips were on his. I took my father by the neck and the woman by the neck and pulled them apart. My father fell back into the casket and the woman was led out, trembling.

"That was your father's girlfriend," said Bert.

"Not a bad looker," I said.

When I walked down the steps after the service the woman was waiting. She ran up to me.

"You look just *like* him! You *are* him!"

"No," I said, "he's dead, and I'm younger and nicer."

She put her arms around me and kissed me. I pushed my tongue between her lips. Then I pulled away. "Here, here," I said in a loud voice, "get ahold of yourself!" She kissed me again and this time I worked my tongue deeper into her mouth. My penis was beginning to get hard. Some men and a woman came up to take her away.

"No," she said, "I want to go with him. I must talk to his son!"

"Now, Maria, please, come with us!"

"No, no, I must talk to his son!"

"Do you mind?" a man asked me.

"It's all right," I said.

Maria got into my car and we drove to my father's house. I opened the door and we walked in. "Look around," I said. "You can have any of his stuff you want. I'm going to take a bath. Funerals make me sweat."

When I came out Maria was sitting on the edge of my father's bed.

"Oh, you're wearing his robe!"

"It's mine now."

"He just *loved* that robe. I gave it to him for Christmas. He was so proud of it. He said he was going to wear it and walk around the block for all the neighbors to see."

"Did he?"

"No."

"It is a nice robe. It's mine now."

I took a pack of cigarettes from the night stand.

"Oh, those are his cigarettes!"

"Want one?"

"No."

I lit up. "How long did you know him?"

"About a year."

"And you didn't find out?"

"Find out what?"

"That he was an ignorant man. Cruel. Patriotic. Money hungry. A liar. A coward. A cheat."

"No."

"I'm surprised. You look like an intelligent woman."

"I loved your father, Henry."

"How old are you?"

"Forty-three."

"You're well preserved. You have lovely legs."

"Thank you."

"Sexy legs."

I went into the kitchen and got a bottle of wine out of the cupboard, pulled the cork, found two wine glasses and walked back in. I poured her a drink and handed her the glass.

"Your father spoke of you often."

"Yes?"

"He said you lacked ambition."

"He was right."

"Really?"

"My only ambition is not to be anything at all; it seems the most sensible thing."

"You're strange."

"No, my father was strange. Let me pour you another drink. This is good wine."

"He said you were a drunkard."

"You see, I *have* achieved something."

"You look so much like him."

"That's just on the surface. He liked soft-boiled eggs, I like hard. He liked company, I like solitude. He liked to sleep nights, I like to sleep days. He liked dogs, I used to yank their ears and stick matches up their ass. He liked his job, I like to lay around."

I reached over and grabbed Maria. I worked her lips open, got my mouth inside of hers and began to suck the air out of her lungs. I spit down her throat and ran my finger up the crack of her ass. We broke apart.

"He kissed me gently," said Maria. "He loved me."

"Shit," I said, "my mother was underground only a month before he was sucking your nipples and sharing your toilet paper."

"He loved me."

"Balls. His fear of being alone led him to your vagina."

"He said you were a bitter young man."

"Hell, yes. Look what I had for a father."

I pulled up her dress and began kissing her legs. I began at the knees. I got to the inner thigh and she opened up for me. I bit her, hard, and she jumped and farted. "Oh, I'm sorry." "It's all right," I said.

I fixed her another drink, lit one of my dead father's cigarettes and went into the kitchen for a second bottle of wine. We drank another hour or two. The afternoon was just turning into evening but I was weary. Death was so dull. That was the worst thing about death. It was dull. Once it happened there wasn't anything you could do. You couldn't play tennis with it or turn it into a box of bonbons. It was there like a flat tire was there. Death was stupid. I climbed into bed. I heard Maria taking off her shoes, her clothes, then I felt her in bed beside me. Her head was on my chest and I felt my fingers rubbing her behind the ears. Then my penis began to rise. I lifted her head and put my mouth on hers. I put it there gently. Then I took her hand and placed it on my cock.

I had drunk too much wine. I mounted her. I stroked and stroked. I was always on the verge but I couldn't arrive. I was giving her a long sweaty neverending horsefuck. The bed jerked and bounced, jiggled and moaned. Maria moaned. I kissed her and kissed her. Her mouth gasped for air. "My god," she said, "you're REALLY FUCKING me!" I only wanted to finish but the wine had dulled the mechanism. Finally I rolled off.

"God," she said. "God."

We began kissing and it started all over again. I mounted once more. This time I felt the climax slowly arriving. "Oh," I said, "oh, Christ!" I finally made it, got up, went to the bathroom, came out, smoking a cigarette and went back to the bed. She was almost asleep. "My god," she said, "you really FUCKED me!" We slept.

In the morning I got up, vomited, brushed my teeth, gargled, and cracked a bottle of beer. Maria awakened and looked at me.

"Did we fuck?" she asked.

"Are you serious?"

"No, I want to know. Did we fuck?"

"No," I said, "nothing happened."

Maria went into the bathroom and showered. She sang. Then she toweled and came out. She looked at me. "I feel like a woman who's been fucked."

"Nothing happened, Maria."

We got dressed and I took her to a cafe around the corner. She had sausage and scrambled eggs, wheat toast, coffee. I had a glass of tomato juice and a bran muffin.

"I can't get over it. You look just like him."

"Not this morning, Maria, please."

While I was watching Maria put scrambled eggs and sausage and wheat toast (spread with raspberry jam) into her mouth I realized that we had missed the burial. We had forgotten to drive to the cemetery to watch the old man dropped into the hole. I had wanted to see that. That was the only good part of the thing. We hadn't joined the funeral procession, instead we had gone to my father's house and smoked his cigarettes and drunk his wine.

Maria put a particularly large mouthful of bright yellow scrambled egg into her mouth and said, "You must have fucked me. I can feel your semen running down my leg."

"Oh, that's just sweat. It's very hot this morning."

I saw her reach down under the table and under her dress. A finger came back up. She sniffed it. “That’s not sweat, that’s semen.”

Maria finished eating and we left. She gave me her address and I drove her there. I parked at the curbing. “Care to come in?”

“Not just now. I’ve got to take care of things. The Estate.”

Maria leaned over and kissed me. Her eyes were large, stricken, stale. “I know you’re much younger but I could love you,” she said. “I’m sure I could.”

When she got to her doorway she turned. We both waved. I drove to the nearest liquor store, got a half pint and the day’s *Racing Form*. I looked forward to a good day at the track. I always did better after a day off.

THE DEATH OF THE FATHER II

My mother had died a year earlier. A week after my father's death I stood in his house alone. It was in Arcadia, and the nearest I had come to the house in some time was passing by on the freeway on my way to Santa Anita.

I was unknown to the neighbors. The funeral was over, and I walked to the sink, poured a glass of water, drank it, then went outside. Not knowing what else to do, I picked up the hose, turned on the water and began watering the shrubbery. Curtains drew back as I stood on the front lawn. Then they began coming out of their houses. A woman walked over from across the street.

"Are you Henry?" she asked me.

I told her that I was Henry.

"We knew your father for years."

Then her husband walked over. "We knew your mother too," he said.

I bent over and shut off the hose. "Won't you come in?" I asked. They introduced themselves as Tom and Nellie Miller and we went into the house.

"You look just like your father."

"Yes, so they tell me."

We sat and looked at each other.

"Oh," said the woman, "he had so *many* pictures. He must have liked pictures."

"Yes, he did, didn't he?"

"I just love that painting of the windmill in the sunset."

"You can have it."

“Oh, can I?”

The doorbell rang. It was the Gibsons. The Gibsons told me that they also had been neighbors of my father’s for years.

“You look just like your father,” said Mrs. Gibson.

“Henry has given us the painting of the windmill.”

“That’s nice. I *love* that painting of the blue horse.”

“You can have it, Mrs. Gibson.”

“Oh, you don’t mean it?”

“Yes, it’s all right.”

The doorbell rang again and another couple came in. I left the door ajar. Soon a single man stuck his head inside. “I’m Doug Hudson. My wife’s at the hairdresser’s.”

“Come in, Mr. Hudson.”

Others arrived, mostly in pairs. They began to circulate through the house.

“Are you going to sell the place?”

“I think I will.”

“It’s a lovely neighborhood.”

“I can see that.”

“Oh, I just *love* this frame but I don’t like the picture.”

“Take the frame.”

“But what should I do with the picture?”

“Throw it in the trash.” I looked around. “If anybody sees a picture they like, please take it.”

They did. Soon the walls were bare.

“Do you need these chairs?”

“No, not really.”

Passersby were coming in from the street, and not even bothering to introduce themselves.

“How about the sofa?” someone asked in a very loud voice. “Do you want it?”

“I don’t want the sofa,” I said.

They took the sofa, then the breakfast nook table and chairs.

“You have a toaster here somewhere, don’t you, Henry?”

They took the toaster.

“You don’t need these dishes, do you?”

"No."

"And the silverware?"

"No."

"How about the coffee pot and the blender?"

"Take them."

One of the ladies opened a cupboard on the back porch. "What about all these preserved fruits? You'll never be able to eat all these."

"All right, everybody, take some. But try to divide them equally."

"Oh, I want the strawberries!"

"Oh, I want the figs!"

"Oh, I want the marmalade!"

People kept leaving and returning, bringing new people with them.

"Hey, here's a fifth of whiskey in the cupboard! Do you drink, Henry?"

"Leave the whiskey."

The house was getting crowded. The toilet flushed. Somebody knocked a glass from the sink and broke it.

"You better save this vacuum cleaner, Henry. You can use it for your apartment."

"All right, I'll keep it."

"He had some garden tools in the garage. How about the garden tools?"

"No, I better keep those."

"I'll give you $15 for the garden tools."

"O.K."

He gave me the $15 and I gave him the key to the garage. Soon you could hear him rolling the lawn mower across the street to his place.

"You shouldn't have given him all that equipment for $15, Henry. It was worth much more than that."

I didn't answer.

"How about the car? It's four years old."

"I think I'll keep the car."

"I'll give you $50 for it."

"I think I'll keep the car."

Somebody rolled up the rug in the front room. After that people began to lose interest. Soon there were only three or four left, then they were all gone. They left me the garden hose, the bed, the refrigerator and stove, and a roll of toilet paper.

I walked outside and locked the garage door. Two small boys came by on roller skates. They stopped as I was locking the garage doors.

"See that man?"

"Yes."

"His father died."

They skated on. I picked up the hose, turned the faucet on and began to water the roses.

HARRY ANN LANDERS

The phone rang. It was the writer, Paul. Paul was depressed. Paul was in Northridge.

"Harry?"

"Yeh?"

"Nancy and I broke up."

"Yeh?"

"Listen, I want to get back with her. Can you help me? Unless *you* want to get back with her?"

Harry smiled into the telephone. "I don't want to get back with her, Paul."

"I don't know what went wrong. She started on the money thing. She started hollering about money. She waved phone bills in my face. Listen, I been hustling. I got this act. Barney and I, we're both dressed in penguin suits…he says one line of a poem, I say the other…four microphones…we got this jazz group playing in back of us…"

"Phone bills, Paul, can be distracting," said Harry. "You ought to stay off her line when you're juiced. You know too many people in Maine, Boston and New Hampshire. Nancy is an anxiety-neurosis case. She can't start her car without having a fit. She straps herself in, starts trembling and honking her horn. Mad as a hatter. And it extends into other areas. She can't go into a Thrifty Drugstore without getting offended by a stockboy chewing on a Mars candy bar."

"She says she supported *you* for three months."

"She supported my cock. Mostly with credit cards."

"Are you as good as they say you are?"

Harry laughed. “I give them soul. That can’t be measured in inches.”

“I want to get back with her. Tell me what to do?”

“Either suck pussy like a man or find a job.”

“But *you* don’t work.”

“Don’t measure yourself by me. That’s the mistake most people make.”

“But where can I get some coin? I’ve really hustled. What am I going to do?”

“Suck air.”

“Don’t you know anything about mercy?”

“The only people who know about mercy are the ones who need it.”

“You’ll need mercy some day.”

“I need it now—it’s just that I need it in a form different than you do.”

“I need coin, Harry, how am I going to make it?”

“Shoot the 30-foot basket. A three-pointer. If you make it you’re in the clear. If you miss, you got yourself a jail cell—no light bills, no phone bills, no gas bills, no bitching females. You can learn a trade and you earn four cents an hour.”

“You can really lay the shit on a man.”

“O.K., get the candy out of your ass and I’ll tell you something.”

“It’s out.”

“I’d say the reason Nancy dropped you is another guy. Black, white, red or yellow. Note this rule and you’ll always be covered: a female seldom moves away from one victim without having another near at hand.”

“Man,” said Paul, “I need help, not theory.”

“Unless you understand the theory you’ll always need help…”

Harry picked up the phone, dialed Nancy’s number.

“Hello?” she answered.

“It’s Harry.”

“Oh.”

"I hear through the vine you got taken in Mexico. Did he get it all?"

"Oh, that…"

"A washed-up Spanish bullfighter, wasn't it?"

"With the most *beautiful* eyes. Not like yours. Nobody can *see* your eyes."

"I don't want anybody to see my eyes."

"Why not?"

"If they saw what I was thinking, I couldn't fool them."

"So, you've phoned to tell me you're running with blinkers on?"

"You know that. What I called for is to tell you that Paul wants to come back. Does that help you in any way?"

"No."

"I thought so."

"Did he really phone you?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I've got a new man now. He's marvelous!"

"I told Paul you were probably interested in somebody else."

"How did you know?"

"I knew."

"Harry?"

"Yeh, doll?"

"Go fuck yourself…"

Nancy hung up.

Now there, he thought, I *try* to be the peacemaker and both of them get pissed. Harry walked into the bathroom and looked at his face in the mirror. My god, he had a kind face. Couldn't they see that? Understanding. Nobility. He spotted a blackhead in near his nose. He squeezed. Out it came, black and lovely, dragging a yellow tail of pus. The breakthrough, he thought, is in understanding women and love. He rolled the blackhead and the pus between his fingers. Or maybe the breakthrough was the ability to kill without caring. He sat down to take a shit while he thought it over.

BEER AT THE CORNER BAR

I don't know how many years ago it was, 15 or 20. I was sitting in my place. It was a hot summer night and I felt dull.

I walked out the door and down the street. It was past dinner time for most families and they sat about watching their tv sets. I walked up to the boulevard. Across the street was a neighborhood bar, an old-fashioned building and bar constructed of wood, painted green and white. I walked in.

After nearly a lifetime spent in bars I had entirely lost my feeling for them. When I wanted something to drink I usually got it at a liquor store, took it home and drank alone.

I walked in and found a stool away from the crowd. I wasn't ill at ease, I simply felt out of place. But if I wanted to go out there was nowhere else for me to go. In our society most of the interesting places to go are either against the law or very expensive.

I ordered a bottle of beer and lit a cigarette. It was just another neighborhood bar. They all knew each other. They told dirty jokes and watched tv. There was only one woman in there, old, in a black dress, red wig. She had on a dozen necklaces and kept lighting her cigarette over and over again. I began to wish I was back in my room and decided to go there after I finished my beer.

A man came in and took the barstool next to mine. I didn't look up, I wasn't interested, but from his voice I imagined him to be about my age. They knew him in the bar. The bartender called him by name and a couple of the regulars said hello. He sat next to me with his beer for three or four minutes; then he said, “Hi, how ya doin’?”

“I’m doing O.K.”

“You new in the neighborhood?”

“No.”

“I haven’t seen you in here before.”

I didn’t answer.

“You from Los Angeles?” he asked.

“Mostly.”

“You think the Dodgers will make it this year?”

“No.”

“You don’t like the Dodgers?”

“No.”

“Who do you like?”

“Nobody. I don’t like baseball.”

“What do you like?”

“Boxing. Bullfighting.”

“Bullfighting’s cruel.”

“Yes, anything is cruel when you lose.”

“But the bull doesn’t stand a chance.”

“None of us do.”

“You’re pretty goddamned negative. Do you believe in God?”

“Not your kind of god.”

“What kind?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I’ve been going to church ever since I can remember.”

I didn’t answer.

“Can I buy you a beer?” he asked.

“Sure.”

The beers arrived.

“Did you read the papers today?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Did you read about those 50 little girls who were burned to death in that Boston orphanage?”

“Yes.”

“Wasn’t that horrible?”

"I suppose it was."

"You *suppose* it was?"

"Yes."

"Don't you *know*?"

"If I had been there I suppose I would have had nightmares about it for the rest of my life. But it's different when you just read about it in the newspapers."

"Don't you feel sorrow for those 50 little girls who burned to death? They were hanging out of the windows screaming."

"I suppose it was horrible. But you see it was just a newspaper headline, a newspaper story. I really didn't think much about it. I turned the page."

"You mean you didn't feel anything?"

"Not really."

He sat a moment and had a drink of his beer. Then he screamed, "*Hey, here's a guy who says he didn't feel a fucking thing when he read about those 50 little orphan girls burning to death in Boston*!"

Everyone looked at me. I looked down at my cigarette. There was a minute of silence. Then the woman in the red wig said, "If I was a man I'd kick his ass all up and down the street."

"*He don't believe in God either*!" said the guy next to me. "*He hates baseball. He loves bullfights, and he likes to see little orphan girls burned to death*!"

I ordered another beer from the bartender, for myself. He pushed the bottle at me with repugnance. Two young guys were playing pool. The youngest, a big kid in a white t-shirt, laid his stick down and walked over to me. He stood behind me sucking air into his lungs, trying to make his chest bigger.

"This is a nice bar. We don't tolerate assholes in here. We kick their butts good, we beat the shit out of them, we beat the living shit out of them!"

I could feel him standing there behind me. I lifted my beer bottle and poured beer into my glass, drank it, lit a cigarette. My hand was perfectly steady. He stood there for some time, then finally walked back to the pool table. The man who had been sitting next to me got off his stool and moved away. "The son of a bitch is negative," I heard him say. "He hates people."

"If I was a man," said the woman in the red wig, "I'd make him beg for mercy. I can't stand bastards like him."

"That's how guys like Hitler talk," said somebody.

"Real hateful jerks."

I drank that beer, ordered another. The two young guys continued to shoot pool. Some people left and the remarks about me began to die down except in the case of the woman in the red wig. She got drunker.

"Prick, prick…you're a real prick! You stink like a cesspool! Betcha hate your country, too, don't you? Your country and your mother and everybody else. Aw, I know you guys! Pricks, cheap cowardly pricks!"

She finally left about 1:30 a.m. One of the kids shooting pool left. The kid in the white t-shirt sat down at the end of the bar and talked to the guy who had bought me the beer. At five minutes to two, I got up slowly and walked out.

Nobody followed me. I walked up the boulevard, found my street. The lights in the houses and the apartments were out. I found my front court. I opened my door and walked in. There was one beer in the refrigerator. I opened it and drank it.

Then I undressed, went to the bathroom, pissed, brushed my teeth, turned out the light, walked to the bed, went to bed and slept.

THE UPWARD BIRD

We were going to interview the well-known poetess, Janice Altrice. The editor of *America in Poetry* was paying me $175 to write her up. Tony accompanied me with his camera. He was to get $50 for the photographs. I had borrowed a tape recorder. The place was back in the hills up a long road. I pulled the car over, took a pull of vodka and passed the bottle to Tony.

"Does she drink?" asked Tony.

"Probably not," I said.

I started the car and we went on. We turned right up a narrow dirt road. Janice was standing in front waiting for us. She was dressed in slacks and wore a white blouse with a high lace collar. We climbed out of the car and walked toward where she stood on the slope of lawn. We introduced ourselves and I started the battery-operated tape recorder.

"Tony's going to take some shots of you," I told her, "be natural."

"Of course," she said.

We walked up the slope and she pointed to the house. "We bought it when prices were very low. We couldn't afford it now." Then she pointed to a smaller house on the side of the hill. "That's my study, we built it ourselves. It even has a bathroom. Come and see it."

We followed her. She pointed again. "Those flowerbeds. We put them in ourselves. We're really good with flowers."

"Beautiful," said Tony.

She opened the door to her study and we went in. It was large and cool with fine Indian blankets and artifacts on the walls.

There was a fireplace, the bookcase, a large desk with an electric typewriter, an unabridged dictionary, typing paper, notebooks. She was small with a very short haircut. Her eyebrows were thick. She smiled often. At the corner of one eye was a deep scar that looked as if it had been etched with a penknife.

"Let's see," I said, "you're five-feet-one and you weigh…?"

"One hundred fifteen."

"Age?"

Janice laughed as Tony took her photo. "It's a woman's prerogative not to answer that question." She laughed again. "Just say that I'm ageless."

She was a grand-looking woman. I could see her behind the podium at some college, reading her poems, answering questions, preparing a new generation of poets, pointing them toward life. She probably had good legs, too. I tried to imagine her in bed but I couldn't.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked me.

"Are you intuitive?"

"Of course. I'll put on some coffee. You both need something to drink."

"You're right."

Janice prepared the coffee and we stepped outside. We went out a side door. There was a miniature playground, swings and trapezes, sandpiles, things of that sort. A young lad of about ten came running down the slope. "That's Jason, my youngest, my baby," said Janice from the doorway.

Jason was a tousled-haired young god, blonde, in short pants and a loose purple blouse. His shoes were gold and blue. He appeared to be healthy and lively.

"Mama, Mama! Push me in the swing! Push, push!" Jason ran to the swing, got in and waited.

"Not now, Jason, we're busy."

"Pushy, pushy, Mama!"

"Not now, Jason…"

“MAMA MAMA MAMA MAMA MAMA MAMA MAMA,” screamed Jason.

Janice walked over and began to push Jason. Back and forth he went, up and down. We waited. After quite a while they finished and Jason slid off. A thick green stream of snot ran from one nostril. He walked up to me. “I like to play with myself,” he said, then he ran off.

“We don’t inhibit him,” said Janice. She stared out over the hills, dreamily. “We used to ride horses here. We fought the land developers. Now the outside world is creeping closer and closer. It’s still lovely, though. It was after I fell off a horse and broke my leg that I wrote my book, *The Upward Bird, A Chorus of Magic*.”

“Yes, I remember,” said Tony.

“I planted that redwood 25 years ago,” she pointed. “We were the only house here in those days, but things change, don’t they? Especially poetry. There’s much that’s new and exciting. And then there’s so much awful stuff.”

We walked back inside and she poured the coffee. We sat and drank the coffee. I asked her who her favorite poets were. Janice quickly mentioned some of the younger ones: Sandra Merrill, Cynthia Westfall, Roberta Lowell, Sister Sarah Norbert and Adrian Poor.

“I wrote my first poem in grammar school, a Mother’s Day poem. The teacher liked it so much that she asked me to read it in front of the class.”

“Your first poetry reading, eh?”

Janice laughed, “Yes, you might say so. I miss both of my parents very much. They’ve been dead over 20 years.”

“That’s unusual.”

“There’s nothing unusual about love,” she said.

She had been born in Huntington Beach and had lived all her life on the west coast. Her father had been a policeman. Janice began writing sonnets in high school where she was fortunate enough to be in a class taught by Inez Claire Dickey. “She introduced me to the discipline of poetic form.”

Janice poured more coffee. “I was always serious about being a poet. I studied under Ivor Summers at Stanford. My first publication was in *An Anthology of Western Poets* edited by Summers.” Summers was a profound influence on her—at first. The Summers group was a good one: Ashberry Charleton, Webdon Wilbur, and Mary Cather Henderson.

But then Janice broke away and joined the poets of “the long line.”

Janice was in law school and also studying poetry. After graduating she became a legal secretary. She married her high school sweetheart during the early forties, “those dark and tragic war years.” Her husband was a fireman. “I evolved into a housewife-poetess.”

“Is there a bathroom?” I asked.

“The door to your left.”

I walked into the bathroom as Tony circled her taking photos. I urinated and took a good belt of the vodka. I zipped up and stepped out of the bathroom and sat down again.

In the late forties Janice Altrice’s poems began to flower in a number of periodicals. Her first book, *I Command Everything To Be Green*, was published by Alan Swillout. It was followed by *Bird, Bird, Bird, Never Die* also brought out by Swillout.

“I went back to school,” she said. “UCLA. I took an M.A. in journalism and an M.A. in English. I received my Ph.D. in English the following year, and since the early sixties I’ve taught English and Creative Writing at the State University here.”

Many awards adorned Janice’s walls: a silver medal from The Los Angeles Aphids Club for her poem “Tintella”; a first place certificate from the Lodestone Mountain Poetry Group for her poem “The Wise Drummer.” There were many other prizes and awards. Janice went to her desk and took out some of her work in progress. She read us several long poems. They showed impressive growth. I asked her what she thought of the contemporary poetry scene.

"There are so *many*," she said, "who go by the name of *poet*. But they have no training, no feeling for their craft. The savages have taken over the castle. There's no workmanship, no care, simply a demand to be accepted. And these new poets all seem to admire one another. It worries me and I've talked about it to a lot of my poet friends. All a young poet seems to think he needs is a typewriter and a few pieces of paper. They aren't prepared, they have had no preparation at all."

"I suppose not," I said. "Tony, do you have enough photos?"

"Yeah," said Tony.

"Another thing which disturbs me," said Janice, "is that the eastern Establishment poets receive too many of the awards and fellowships. Western poets are ignored."

"Is it possible that the eastern poets are better?" I asked.

"I certainly don't think so."

"Well," I said, "I suppose it's time for us to go. One last question. How do you approach the writing of a poem?"

She paused. Her long fingers delicately stroked the heavy fabric that covered her chair. The setting sun slanted through the window and cast shadows in the room. She spoke slowly, as if in a dream. "I begin to feel a poem a long way off. It approaches me, like a cat, across the rug. Softly but not with contempt. It takes seven or eight days. I become delightfully agitated, excited, it's such a special feeling. I know it's there, and then it comes with a *rush*, and it's easy, so easy. The glory of creating a poem, it's so regal, so sublime!"

I switched off the tape recorder. "Thank you, Janice, I'll send you copies of the interview when it's published."

"I hope it went all right."

"It went quite well, I'm sure."

She walked us to the door. Tony and I walked down the slope to our car. I turned once. She was standing there. I waved. Janice smiled and waved back. We got in, drove around the bend, then I stopped the car and unscrewed the cap off the vodka bottle. "Save me a hit," said Tony. I took a hit and saved him a hit.

Tony threw the bottle out the window. We drove away, coming quickly down out of the hills. Well, it beat working in a car wash. All I had to do was type it up off the tape and select two or three photos. We came out of the hills just in time to hit the rush hour traffic. It was strictly the shits. We could have timed it much better than that.

COLD NIGHT

Leslie walked along under the palm trees. He stepped over a dog turd. It was 10:15 p.m. in east Hollywood. The market had gone up 22 points that day and the experts couldn't explain why. The experts were much better at explaining when the market went down. Doom made them happy. It was cold in east Hollywood. Leslie buttoned the top button on his coat and shivered. He hunched his shoulders against the chill.

A little man in a grey felt hat approached him. The man had a face like the front of a watermelon, no expression. Leslie pulled out a cigarette and stepped into the little man's path. The man was about 45, five-feet-six, maybe 140 pounds.

"Got a match, sir?" he asked the man.

"Oh, yes…" The man reached into his pocket and as he did Leslie kneed him in the groin. The man grunted and bent forward and Leslie clubbed him behind one ear. When the man fell Leslie kneeled and rolled him over, pulled out his knife and slit the man's throat in the cold east Hollywood moonlight.

It was all very strange. It was like a half-remembered dream. Leslie couldn't be sure if it was all actually happening or not. At first the blood seemed to hesitate, there was just the deep wound, then the blood gushed forth. Leslie pulled back in disgust. He got up, walked away. Then he returned, reached into the man's pocket, found the book of matches, stood up, lit his cigarette and walked away down the street to his apartment. Leslie never had enough matches, a man was always short of matches, it seemed. Matches and ballpoint pens…

Leslie sat down with a scotch and water. The radio played some Copeland. Well, Copeland wasn't much but it beat Sinatra. You took what you got and you tried to make do. That's what his old man had told him. Fuck his old man. Fuck all the Jesus freaks. Fuck Billy Graham right up the old rugged tailpipe.

There was a knock on the door. It was Sonny, the young blonde kid who lived across from him on the opposite side of the court. Sonny was half man and half dick and he was confused. Most guys with big dicks had trouble when the fucking was over. But Sonny was nicer than most; he was mild, he was gentle and he had some intelligence. Sometimes he was even funny.

"Listen, Leslie, I want to talk to you for a few minutes."

"O.K. But shit, I'm tired. I was at the track all day."

"Bad, huh?"

"When I got back to the parking lot after it was over I found some son of a bitch had ripped off my fender getting out of there. That's such dumb stale shit, you know."

"How'd you make out with the horses?"

"I won $280. But I'm tired."

"O.K. I won't stay long."

"All right. What is it? Your old lady? Why don't you beat the shit out of your old lady? You'll both feel better."

"No, my old lady's all right. It's just…shit, I don't know. Things, you know. I can't seem to get *into* anything. I can't seem to get *started*. Everything's locked up. All the cards are taken."

"Fuck, that's standard. Life's a one-sided game. But you're only 27, maybe you'll luck into something, somehow."

"What were you doing when you were my age?"

"Worse off than you. I used to lay out in the dark at night, drunk, on the street, hoping somebody would run me over. No luck."

"You couldn't think of another way?"

"That's one of the hardest things, figuring out what your first move should be."

"Yeah. Things seem so useless."

"We murdered God's son. Do you think that Bastard is going to forgive us? I may be crazy but I know He's not!"

"You sit there in your torn bathrobe and you're drunk half the time but you're saner than anybody I know."

"Hey, I like that. Do you know a lot of people?"

Sonny just shrugged. "What I need to know: is there a way out? Is there any kind of way out?"

"Kid, there's no way out. The shrinks advise us to take up chess or stamp collecting or billiards. Anything rather than think about the larger issues."

"Chess is boring."

"Everything is boring. There's no escape. You know what some old time bums used to tattoo on their arms: 'BORN TO DIE.' As corny as that sounds it's basic wisdom."

"What do you think the bums have tattooed on their arms now?"

"I don't know. Probably something like 'JESUS SHAVES.'"

"We can't get away from God, can we?"

"Maybe He can't get away from us."

"Well, listen, it's always good to talk to you. I always feel better after I talk to you."

"Anytime, kid."

Sonny got up, opened the door, closed it and was gone. Leslie poured another scotch. Well, the L.A. Rams had drafted for their defensive line. A good move. Everything in life was evolving toward DEFENSE. The iron curtain, the iron mind, the iron life. Some real tough coach would finally punt on first down every time his team got the ball and he'd never lose a game.

Leslie finished the scotch, pulled his pants down and scratched his ass, digging the fingers in. People who cured their hemorrhoids were fools. When there wasn't anybody else around it beat being alone. Leslie poured himself another scotch. The phone rang.

"Hello?"

It was Francine. Francine liked to impress him. Francine liked to think she impressed him. But she was an elephantine bore. Leslie often thought about how kind he was to let her bore him the way she did. The average guy would drop the receiver on her like a guillotine.

Who was it who had written that excellent essay about the guillotine? Camus? Camus, yes. Camus had been a bore, too. But the guillotine essay and *The Stranger* were exceptional.

"I had lunch at the Beverly Hills Hotel today," she said. "I had a table to myself. I had a salad and drinks. Dustin Hoffman was there and some other movie stars, too. I talked to the people sitting near me and they smiled and nodded, all the tables of smiles and nods, little yellow faces like daffodils. I kept talking and they kept smiling. They thought I was some kind of nut and the way to get rid of me was to smile. They became more and more nervous. Do you understand?"

"Of course."

"I thought you might like to hear about that."

"Yeah…"

"Are you alone? Do you want company?"

"I'm really tired tonight, Francine."

After a while Francine hung up. Leslie undressed, scratched his ass again and walked into the bathroom. He ran the dental floss between his few remaining teeth. What an ugliness, this hanging on. He ought to smash out the remaining teeth with a hammer. All the alley fights he had been in and nobody had gotten the front teeth. Well, everything would be gone eventually. Over. Leslie put some Crest on the electric toothbrush and tried to buy some time.

After that he sat up in bed for a long while with a last scotch and a cigarette. They were, at least, something to do while you waited to see how things would turn out. He looked at the matchbook in his hand and suddenly realized it was the one he'd taken from the man with the watermelon face. The thought startled him. Had that really happened or not? He

stared at the matchbook, wondering. He looked at the cover:
1,000 PERSONALIZED LABELS

WITH YOUR NAME AND ADDRESS

JUST $1.00

Now, he thought, that doesn't seem to be such a bad deal.

A FAVOR FOR DON

I rolled over in bed and picked up the phone. It was Lucy Sanders. I'd known her two or three years, sexually for three months. We had just split up. She was telling the story that she had dumped me because I was a drunk but the truth was that I had left her for my previous girlfriend.

She hadn't taken it well. I decided I should go over to explain to her why it was necessary for me to leave her. In the book it's called "letting them down easy." I wanted to be a nice guy. When I got there her girlfriend let me in.

"What the hell do you want?"

"I want to let Lucy down easy."

"She's in the bedroom."

I walked in. She was on her bed, drunk, dressed only in panties. She had almost emptied a pint of scotch. There was a pot on the floor into which she had vomited.

"Lucy," I said.

She turned her head. "It's you, you've come back! I knew you wouldn't stay with that bitch."

"Now wait a minute, baby, I just came to explain why I left you. I'm a nice guy. I thought I'd explain."

"You're a bastard. You're a horrible man!"

I sat down on the edge of the bed, took the bottle off the headboard and had a good swallow.

"Thanks. Now you knew I loved Lilly. You knew that when I lived with you. Her and me—we have an understanding."

"But you said she was killing you!"

"Just dramatics. People split up and go back together all the time. It's part of the process."

"I took you in. I saved you."

"I know. You saved me for Lilly."

"You bastard, you don't know a good woman when you have one!"

Lucy leaned over the edge of the bed and vomited.

I finished off the pint. "You shouldn't drink this stuff. It's poison."

She pulled herself up. "Stay with me, Larry, don't go back to her. Stay with me!"

"Can't do it, baby."

"Look at my legs! I have nice legs! Look at my breasts! I have nice breasts!"

I threw the pint in the wastebasket. "Sorry, I gotta go, baby."

Lucy leaped off the bed at me with her fists doubled. The punches hit me in the mouth, the nose. I let her work away for a couple of seconds, then grabbed her wrists and threw her back on the bed. I turned and walked out of the bedroom. Her girlfriend was in the front room.

"Try to be a nice guy, you get a scab on your nose," I told her.

"There's no way you will ever be a nice guy," she said.

I slammed the door, got in my car and drove off.

It was Lucy on the phone. "Larry?"

"Yeh. What is it?"

"Listen—I want to meet your friend, Don."

"Why?"

"You said he was your only friend. I'd like to meet your only friend."

"Well, hell, all right."

"Thanks."

"I'm going over to his place after I visit my daughter on Wednesday. I'll be there about 5:00. Why don't you come by about 5:30 and I'll introduce you?"

I gave her the address and instructions. Don Dorn was a painter. He was 20 years younger than I was and lived in a small house on the beach. I turned over and went back to sleep. I always slept until noon. It was the secret of my successful existence.

Don and I had two or three beers before Lucy arrived. She appeared excited and had brought along a bottle of wine. I made the introductions and Don uncorked the wine. Lucy sat between us and drained her glass of wine. Don and I stuck with our beer.

"Oh," said Lucy, looking at Don, "he's just *gorgeous*!"

Don didn't say anything. She tugged at his shirt. "You're just *gorgeous*!" She emptied her glass and poured another. "Did you just get out of the shower?"

"About an hour ago."

"Oh, you have ringlets in your hair! You're *gorgeous*!"

"How's the painting coming, Don?" I asked.

"I don't know. I'm getting tired of my style. I think I've got to break into another area."

"Oh, are these your paintings on the wall?" Lucy asked.

"Yeh."

"They're marvelous! Do you sell them?"

"Sometimes."

"I just *love* your fish! Where did you get all the fish tanks?"

"I bought them."

"Look at that orange fish! I just *love* that orange one!"

"Yeh. He's nice."

"Do they eat each other?"

"Sometimes."

"You're *gorgeous*!"

Lucy drank glass after glass of wine.

"You're drinking too fast," I said.

"Look who's talking."

"You still with Lilly?" asked Don.

"Solid gold," I said.

Lucy drained her glass. The bottle was empty. "Excuse me," she said. She ran to the bathroom. Then we heard her vomiting.

"How are the horses running?" Don asked.

"Pretty good right now. How's your life going? Had any good fucks lately?"

"I've run into a streak of bad luck."

"Keep the faith. Your luck might change."

"I sure as hell hope so."

"Lilly keeps getting better and better. I don't see how she does it."

Lucy came out of the bathroom. "My god, I'm sick, I'm dizzy!" She threw herself on Don's bed and stretched out. "I'm dizzy."

"Just close your eyes," I said.

Lucy lay on the bed looking at me and moaning. Don and I drank some more beer. Then I told him I had to leave.

"Stay healthy," I said.

"God bless," he said.

I left him standing in the doorway, rather drunk, and drove off.

I rolled over in bed and picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

It was Lucy.

"I'm sorry about last night. I drank that wine too fast. But I cleaned up the bathroom like a good little girl. Don's a nice fellow. I really like him. I might buy one of his paintings."

"Good. He needs the scratch."

"You're not mad at me, are you?"

"What for?"

She laughed. "I mean, getting sick and all that."

"Everyone in America gets sick now and then."

"I'm not a drunk."

"I know."

"I'll be home all weekend if you decide you want to see me."

"I don't."

"You're not mad, Larry?"
"No."
"All right then. Toodleoooo."
"Toodleoooo."

I put the phone back in its cradle and closed my eyes. If I kept winning at the track I was going to buy a new car. I was going to move to Beverly Hills. The phone rang again.

"Hello?"

It was Don.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm all right. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"I'm going to move to Beverly Hills."

"Sounds great."

"I want to live closer to my daughter."

"How's your daughter doing?"

"She's beautiful. She has everything, inside and out."

"You heard from Lucy?"

"She just phoned."

"She sucked me off."

"How was it?"

"I couldn't come."

"Sorry."

"It wasn't your fault."

"I hope not."

"Well, you're all right then, Larry?"

"I think so."

"O.K., keep in touch."

"Sure. Goodbye, Don."

I put the phone back in its cradle and closed my eyes. It was only 10:45 a.m. and I always slept until noon. Life's as kind as you let it be.

PRAYING MANTIS

Angel's View Hotel. Marty paid the clerk, took the key and was walking up the stairway. It was less than a pleasant night. Room 222. What did that mean? He walked inside and flipped on the light. A dozen roaches crawled away into the wallpaper and chewed and moved and chewed. There was a telephone, a pay phone. He put the dime in and dialed the number. She answered. "Toni?" he asked.

"Yeh, this is Toni…" she said.

"Toni, I'm going crazy."

"I told you I'd come see you. Where you at?"

"The Angel View, Sixth and Coronado, Room 222."

"I'll see you in a couple of hours."

"Can't you come now?"

"Listen, I've got to take the kids over to Carl's, then I want to stop off and see Jeff and Helen, I haven't seen them in years…"

"Toni, I love you for Christ's sake, I want to see you now!"

"Maybe if you got rid of your wife, Marty…"

"These things take time."

"See you in a couple of hours, Marty."

"Listen, Toni…"

She hung up. Marty walked over and sat on the edge of the bed. This would be his last involvement. It took too much out of him. Women were stronger than men. They knew all the moves. He didn't know any of the moves.

There was a knock on the door. He walked over and opened it. It was a blonde in her mid-thirties in a torn blue smock. The mascara was very purple and the lipstick was on heavy. There was a slight smell of gin.

"Listen, you don't mind if I play my tv, do you?"

"It's all right, go ahead."

"Last guy had your room was some kind of nut. I'd turn on my tv and he'd start banging on the walls."

"It's all right. You can play your tv." Marty closed the door. He dug the next to last cigarette out of his pack and lit it. That Toni was in his blood, he had to get her out of his blood. There was another knock on the door. It was the blonde again. The mascara was purple and her eyes almost matched; of course it was impossible, but it looked as if she had added another layer of lipstick.

"Yes?" asked Marty.

"Listen," she said, "do you know what the female praying mantis does while they are doing the thing?"

"What thing?"

"Fucking."

"What does she do?"

"She eats his head off. While they are doing the thing she eats his head off. Well, I guess there are worse ways to die, don't you think?"

"Yeah," said Marty, "like cancer."

The blonde walked into the room and closed the door behind her. She walked over and sat in the only chair. Marty sat on the bed. "Did it get you excited when I said 'fucking'?" she asked.

"Yeah, a little."

The blonde got up from the chair and walked over to the bed and put her head real close to Marty's, she looked into his eyes and put her lips very close to his. Then she said, "*Fucking, fucking, fucking*!" She got a little closer, then said it once more: "FUCKING!" Then she walked over and sat back down in the chair.

"What's your name?" asked Marty.

"Lilly. Lilly LaVell. I used to strip at the Burbank."

"I'm Marty Evans. Glad to know you, Lilly."

"*Fucking*," said Lilly very slowly, spreading her lips and showing her tongue.

"You can play your tv anytime," said Marty.

"You heard about the black widow spider?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"Well, I'll tell you. After they do the thing—*fucking*—she eats him alive."

"Oh," said Marty.

"But there are worse ways of dying, don't you think?"

"Sure, like leprosy, maybe."

The blonde got up and walked up and down, up and down. "I got drunk the other night, I was out on the freeway, I was listening to a horn concerto, Mozart, that horn ran right *through* me, I'm doing 85 miles an hour and I'm driving with my elbows listening to this horn concerto, can you believe that?"

"Sure, I believe it."

Lilly stopped walking and looked at Marty. "Do you believe I can get you in my mouth and do things to you that have never been done to a man?"

"Well, I don't know what to believe."

"Well, I can, I can…"

"You're nice, Lilly, but I've got to meet my girlfriend here in about an hour."

"Well, I'll get you ready for her."

Lilly walked over beside him, unzipped him and pulled his penis out of his jockey shorts.

"Oh, he's cute!"

Lilly wet her middle finger, right hand, and began to rub the head and just below and back of the head.

"But he's so purple!"

"Just like your mascara…"

"Oh, he's getting so BIG!"

Marty laughed. A roach crawled out on the wallpaper to catch the action. Then another came out. They wiggled their feelers. Suddenly Lilly's mouth was on his penis. She gripped him right below the head and sucked. Her tongue was almost like sandpaper; it seemed to know all the right places. Marty looked down at the top of her head and became very excited. He began to pet her hair and sounds dropped out of his mouth. Then suddenly she bit into his cock, hard. She almost bit him in half. Then still biting she yanked her head up. A piece of the head came off. Marty screamed and rolled over and over on the bed. The blonde stood up and spit. Pieces of flesh and blood spattered on the rug. Then she walked over, opened the door, closed it and was gone.

Marty took the pillowcase off and held it against his penis. He was afraid to look. He felt his heartbeat throbbing throughout his whole body, especially down there. The blood began to spread through the pillowcase. Then the phone rang. He managed to get up, walk over and answer it. “Yeh?” “Marty?” “Yeh?” “This is Toni.” “Yeh, Toni…” “You sound funny…” “Yeh, Toni…” “Is that all you can say? I’m over at Jeff and Helen’s. I’ll see you in about an, hour.” “Sure.” “Listen, what’s wrong with you? I thought you loved me?” “I don’t know any more, Toni…” “All right, then,” she said angrily and hung up.

Marty managed to find a dime and get it in the phone. “Operator, I want a private ambulance service. Get me anybody but do it fast. I may be dying…”

“Have you checked with your doctor, sir?”

“Operator, please get me a private ambulance service!”

Next door to the left, the blonde sat in front of her tv set. She reached over and switched it on. She was just in time for the Dick Cavett Show.

BROKEN MERCHANDISE

Frank pulled onto the freeway into the traffic.

He was a shipping clerk for the American Clock Company. Six years now. Never held a job for six years before and now the son of a bitch was really killing him. But at the age of 42 with a high school education and ten percent unemployment he didn't have much choice. It was his 15th or 16th job and all the jobs had been terrible.

Frank was tired and he wanted to get home and have a beer. He maneuvered his Volks into the fast lane. When he got out there he was no longer so sure that he was in a hurry to get home. Fran would be waiting. Four years now.

He knew what was coming. Fran couldn't wait for the first verbal shot. He always waited for her first shot. Jesus, she couldn't wait to put the knock on him. Then, knock, knock, knock…

Frank knew he was a loser. He didn't need Fran to remind him of the fact, to illuminate it. You'd think that two people living together would help each other. But no, they fell into the habit of criticism. He criticized her, she criticized him. They were both losers. Now all they had left was to see who could be the most sarcastic about it all.

And that son of a bitch, Meyers. Meyers had walked back to the shipping department ten minutes before quitting time and stood there.

"Frank."

"Yes?"

"Are you putting FRAGILE labels on all the shipments?"

“Yes.”

“Are you packing carefully?”

“Yes.”

“We’re getting more and more complaints from our customers about receiving broken merchandise.”

“I suppose that accidents occur in transit.”

“Are you sure you’re packing the shipments properly?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe we had better try some different trucking lines?”

“They’re all the same.”

“Well, I want to see an improvement. I want less breakage.”

“Yes, sir.”

Meyers had once controlled the American Clock Company but drinking and a bad marriage had ruined him. He had had to sell most of his stock and was now only an assistant manager. He had gone on the wagon and as a result was always irritable. Meyers was continually trying to draw Frank out and make him angry. Then he would have an excuse to fire him.

There was nothing worse than a reformed drunk and a Born Again Christian and Meyers was both…

Frank drew up behind an old car in the fast lane. It was a battered gas-eater, a sedan, and it gave off a dirty trail of smoke from the exhaust. The fenders were smashed and vibrated as the sedan drove along. The paint job had almost vanished from the car, it was almost colorless, a smog grey.

All that didn’t bother Frank. What bothered him was that the car was going too slow, going the same speed as the car opposite it in the next lane. He checked his speedometer. They were all doing 52. Why?

Maybe it didn’t matter. Fran was waiting. It was Fran at one end and Meyers at the other. The only time he had alone, the only time somebody wasn’t ripping at him was when he was driving back and forth to work. Or when he was asleep.

But still he didn’t like being boxed in on the freeway. It was senseless. He looked at the two guys in the front seat of the sedan. They were both talking at once and laughing. They were two young punks about 23 or 24. Frank was glad he didn't have to listen to the conversation. Those punks were beginning to irritate him.

Then Frank saw his chance. The car on the right of the old sedan was going just a little bit faster, it was pulling ahead. Frank swung around behind the other car.

He began to taste the freedom of busting out of there. It would be a small victory after a horrible day with a horrible evening to come. He was going to make it.

Then just as he was getting ready to cut out in front of the old sedan the punk at the wheel stepped on the gas, pulled up, cut him off and drove alongside the other car again.

Frank swung back behind the punks' car. They were still talking and laughing. He saw their bumper sticker. JESUS LOVES YOU.

Then he noticed a decal on the rear window. THE WHO.

Well, they had Jesus and they had The Who. Why in the hell couldn't they let him by?

Frank pulled up behind them, rode their rear bumper. They went on talking and laughing. They kept driving at exactly the same speed as the car to their right. 50 mph.

Frank checked his rear view mirror. There was an unbroken stream of traffic as far back as he could see.

Frank worked his Volks from the fast lane into the next lane, then worked over into the slow lane. Traffic was moving faster there. He slipped around a car by darting left and then broke loose into the open. As he did he saw the old sedan speed up. The punks pulled up alongside of him. Frank checked his speedometer. 62 mph. Frank ran it up to 65. The punks were still there. He pushed it to 70. The punks stayed with him.

Now they were in a hurry. Why?

Frank pushed the accelerator all the way down. The Volks would only do 75. He was going to burn up the engine or throw a rod. The punks were keeping up with him even though they were grinding their car to death too.

He looked over at them. Two young blond guys with wisps of goatees. Their faces looked at him. Bland faces like turkey butts with little holes for mouths.

The punk next to the driver gave him the finger.

Frank pointed first at the finger guy, then at the driver. Then he pointed to the freeway exit. They both nodded.

Frank led them to the freeway exit. He stopped at a signal. They waited behind him. Then Frank took a right and drove along with the punks behind him. He drove until he saw a supermarket. He drove into the parking lot. He noted the loading dock. It was dark back there. The market was closed. The dock was deserted, the steel doors pulled down. There was nothing back there but space and stacks of empty wooden crates. Frank pulled up to the loading dock. He got out of his car, locked it and walked up the ramp and along the dock. The punks pulled in their old sedan alongside his car and got out.

They walked up the ramp toward him. Neither one of them weighed over 130 pounds. Together they only outweighed him 30 pounds.

Then the guy who had given the finger said, “O.K., you old shit!” He rushed at Frank, making a high, squealing sound, his hands held flat in some kind of karate gesture. The punk whirled, tried a backward kick, missed, then came around and cracked Frank on the ear with the side of his hand. It was no more than a slap. Frank put all of his 230 pounds behind a hard right to the punk’s belly and the kid slumped to the pavement holding his gut.

The other punk pulled out a switchblade, flicked it open.

“I’ll cut your fuckin’ balls off!” he said to Frank.

Frank waited as the punk moved in, nervously changing the knife from hand to hand. Frank backed up toward the crates. The punk moved in making hissing sounds. Frank waited, his back against the boxes. Then as the punk moved in Frank reached up, grabbed a crate and threw it at him. It slammed into the punk’s face and as it did Frank moved in and grabbed his knife arm. The blade fell to the ground and Frank twisted the arm behind the punk's back. He pushed the arm up as far as he could.

"*Please don't break my arm*!" the punk squealed.

Frank let the punk go and as he did he kicked him in the ass, hard. The kid fell forward, grabbing at his butt. Frank picked up the knife, flicked in the blade, pocketed it and walked slowly back to his car. As he got in and started the Volks he could see the two punks standing close to each other by the old sedan watching him. They were no longer talking and laughing.

Suddenly he gunned his car and ran it at them. They scattered and at the last moment he veered off. He slowed down and drove out of the parking lot.

He noticed that his hands were trembling. It had been one hell of a day. He drove along the boulevard. The Volks ran badly, sputtering, as if to object to its mistreatment on the freeway.

Then Frank saw the bar. The Lucky Knight. There was parking in front. He stopped, got out and went in.

Frank sat down and ordered a Bud. "Where's your phone?"

The barkeep told him. It was back near the crapper. He put the coin in and dialed the number.

"Yes?" Fran answered.

"Listen, Fran, I'm going to be a little late. I got held up. See you soon."

"Held up? You mean you got robbed?"

"No, I got in a fight."

"A *fight*? Don't tell me that! You couldn't fight your way out of a paper bag!"

"Fran, I wish you wouldn't use those old, stale expressions."

"Well, it's true! You couldn't fight your way out of a paper bag!"

Frank hung up and walked back to the bar stool. He picked up his bottle of Bud and took a hit.

"I like a man who drinks right out of the bottle!"

There was somebody sitting next to him. A woman. She was about 38, dirt under her fingernails, her dyed blonde hair piled loosely on top of her head. Two silver loops dangled from her ears and her mouth was heavy with lipstick. She licked her lips, slowly, then she stuck a Virginia Slim into that mouth and lit it.

"I'm Diana."

"Frank. What do you drink?"

"He knows…" She nodded to the barkeep and the barkeep picked up a bottle of her favorite brand of whiskey and moved toward them. Frank pulled out a ten and placed it on the bar.

"You got a fascinating face," said Diana. "What do you do?"

"Nothing."

"Just the kind of man I like."

She lifted her drink and pressed her leg against his as she drank. Frank took his fingernail and slowly peeled the wet beer label off his bottle. Diana finished her drink. Frank motioned to the barkeep.

"Two more."

"Yeah, what'll you have?"

"I'll take hers."

"You'll take hers?" asked the barkeep. "*Wow*!"

They all laughed. Frank lit a smoke and the barkeep brought the bottle down. Suddenly it looked like a pretty good night after all.

HOME RUN

I guess I was about 28 at that time. I wasn't working but I had a little money because I had lucked it at the track—finally. It was around 9 p.m. I had been drinking in my rented room for a couple of hours. I was bored and I came out and started walking down the street. I came to a bar across the street from my usual bar and for some reason I went in. It was a lot cleaner and fancier in there than in my usual bar and I thought, well, maybe I'll luck into a class piece of ass.

I sat down near the entrance, took a stool a couple of seats away from this girl. She was alone and there were four or five people, men and women, at the other end of the bar. The barkeep was down there talking to them and laughing. I must have sat three or four minutes. The barkeep just kept talking and laughing. I hated those pricks, they drank all they wanted, got tips, got ass, got admiration, got everything they wanted.

I pulled out a pack of smokes. Tapped one out. No matches. None on the bar. I looked at the lady.

"Pardon me, got a light?"

Irritated, she dug into her purse. She came up with a book of matches, Then without looking at me, she tossed them down.

"Keep 'em," she said.

She had long hair and a good body. She had on a fake fur coat and a little fur hat. I watched her tilt her head back after sucking at her smoke. She exhaled like she really knew some god damned thing. Those are the kind you like to belt-whip.

The barkeep kept ignoring me.

I picked up an ashtray, held it about two feet above the bar and dropped it. That got him. He came on down, treading the boards. He was a big one, maybe six-feet-four, 265 pounds. Some fat around the gut, but big shoulders, big head, big hands. He was handsome in a dumb kind of way, a strand of drunken hair hanging over one eye.

"Double Cutty Sark on the rocks," I told him.

"Good thing you didn't break that ashtray," he said.

"Good thing you heard it," I answered.

The boards creaked and groaned as he walked back to mix the drink.

"I hope he doesn't mix me a Mickey," I said to the girl in the fake mink.

"Jimmy's nice," she said. "Jimmy doesn't do things like that."

"I've never met a nice guy named 'Jimmy,'" I told her.

Jimmy came back with my drink. I reached into my wallet and dropped a $50 bill on the bar. Jimmy picked it up, held it up to the light and said, "*Shit*!"

"What's the matter, boy?" I asked. "Never seen a $50 bill before?"

He walked off down the boards. I took a hit of my drink. It was a double all right.

"Guy acts like he never saw $50 before," I said to the girl in the fur hat. "I carry nothing *but* 50s."

"You're full of shit," she said.

"No, I'm not," I told her. "I took a dump about 20 minutes ago."

"Big deal…"

"I can buy anything you've got."

"It's not for sale," she said.

"What's the matter? You got a lock on it? If you have, don't worry, nobody's going to ask for the key."

I took another hit.

"Wanna drink?" I asked.

"I only drink with people I like," she said.

"Now *you're* full of shit," I told her.

Where's the barkeep with my change? I thought. He's taking a long time…

I was just about the drop the ashtray again when he came back, cracking wood with his dumb feet.

He put the change down. I looked at it as he started to walk off.

"HEY!" I yelled.

He came back down. "What is it?"

"This is change for a ten. I gave you $50."

"You gave me a ten…"

I turned to the girl. "Listen, you saw it, didn't you? I gave him $50!"

"You gave Jimmy a ten," she said.

"What the fuck *is* this?" I asked.

Jimmy began walking off.

"*You can't get away with this*!" I hollered.

He just kept on walking. He walked back to the gang at the end of the bar and they all started talking and laughing.

I sat there thinking about it. The girl next to me blew a plume of smoke out of her nose, her head tilted back.

I thought about smashing the mirror behind the bar. I'd done that once at another place. Yet, I hesitated.

Was I losing it?

That son of a bitch had pissed all over me with everybody watching.

His cool worried me more than his size. He had something else going for him. A gun under the bar? He wanted me to play into his hand. The witnesses would be his…

I didn't know what to do. There was a phone booth near the exit. I got up, went over, got in, dropped in a coin, dialed a number at random. I would pretend that I was calling my buddies, that they would come right over and bust up the bar. I listened to the number ringing at the other end. It stopped. A woman answered.

"Hello," she said.

"It's me," I answered.

"That you, Sam?"

"Yeah, yeah, now listen…"

"Sam, a terrible thing happened today! Wooly got run over!"

"Wooly?"

"Our *dog*, Sam! Wooly's *dead*!"

"Now, listen! I'm at the Red Eye! You know where it's at? Good! I want you to bring Lefty and Larry and Tony and Big Angelo down here, *fast! Got* it? And bring *Wooly* too!"

I hung up and sat there. I thought about calling the police. I knew what would happen then. They'd back up the barkeep. And I'd end up in the drunk tank.

I got out of the phone booth and walked back to my bar stool. I finished my drink. Then I picked up the ashtray and dropped it, hard. The barkeep looked at me. I stood up, raised my arm and pointed a finger at him. Then I turned and walked out the exit, his laughter and the laughter of his crowd following me…

I stopped at the liquor store, picked up two bottles of wine, and went to the Hotel Helen which was across the street from the bar I had been in. I had a girlfriend there, an alky like me. She was ten years older than I was, and she worked as a maid there. I walked up two flights, knocked on her door, hoping she'd be alone.

"Baby," I called, "I'm in trouble. I've been fucked-over…"

The door opened. Betty was alone and drunker than I was.

I walked in and closed the door behind me.

"Where are your drinking glasses?"

She pointed and I peeled a bottle and poured two. She sat on the edge of the bed and I sat in a chair. I passed her the bottle. She lit a cigarette.

"I hate this place, Benny. How come we don't live together anymore?"

"You started running the streets, baby, you drove me crazy."

"Well, you know how I am."

"Yeah…"

Betty took her cigarette and absentmindedly pushed it down into the bedsheet. I saw the smoke start to come up. I walked over and lifted her hand. There was a plate on the dresser. I got it and brought it over. It had dried food on it, looked like a tamale. I put the plate next to her on the bed.

“Here’s an ashtray…”

“You know I miss you,” she said.

I drained my wine, poured another. “Look, I got short-changed out of $50 across the street.”

“Where’d *you* get $50?”

“Never mind, I got it. That son of a bitch short-changed me…”

“Why didn’t you bust him up? You scared? That’s Jimmy. The women *love* him! Every night after the bar closes he goes out back in the parking lot and sings. They stand around and listen and then one of them gets to go home with him.”

“He’s a hunk of shit…”

“He played football for Notre Dame.”

“What kind of crap is that? You go for this guy?”

“I can’t stand him.”

“Good. Because I’m going to bust his sack.”

“I think you’re scared…”

“Ever seen me duck a fight?”

“I’ve seen you lose a few.”

I didn’t answer that remark. We kept drinking and the conversation wandered around to other things. I don’t remember much about the conversation. When she wasn’t running the streets Betty was a pretty good soul. She had sense, but she was confused, you know. A total alky. *I* could quit for a day or two. She never could stop. It was sad. We talked. We had an understanding which made it easy to be around one another. Then it got to be 2 a.m. Betty said, “Come here, watch…”

We went to the window and there was Jimmy the barkeep out in the parking lot. Sure enough, he was singing. There were three girls watching him. There was plenty of laughter.

Much of it about my $50 bill, I thought.

Then one of the girls got into his car with him. The other two walked off. The car sat a moment. The lights came on, the engine kicked over, then he drove off.

What a flash-ass, I thought. I never turn on my lights until *after* the engine kicks over.

I looked at Betty. “That son of a bitch really thinks he’s a hot number. I’m gonna bust his sack.”

“You don’t have the guts,” she answered.

“Listen,” I asked, “you still have that baseball bat under your bed?”

“Yeah, but I can’t part with it…”

“Sure you can,” I said, handing her a ten.

“O.K.” She slid it out from under the bed. “Hope you hit a homer…”

The next night at 2 a.m. I was waiting in the parking lot, up against the side of the bar, crouched behind a couple of large garbage cans. I had Betty’s baseball bat, an old Jimmy Foxx special.

I didn’t have to wait long. The barkeep came out with his girls.

“Sing for us, Jimmy!”

“Sing us one of your *own* songs!”

“Well…all right,” he said.

He took off his necktie, stuck it in his pocket, unbuttoned his shirt at the neck, lifted his head to the moon.

> “I am the man you’re waiting for…
> I am the man you must adore…
> I am the man who will fuck you on the floor…
> I am the man who will make you ask for more…
> …and more…
> …and more…”

The three girls applauded and laughed and crowded around him.

“Oh, Jimmy!”

"Oh, JIMMY!"

Jimmy stepped back and looked the girls over. They waited. Finally he said, "O.K., tonight it's…Caroline…"

With that, the other two girls looked crestfallen, obediently ducked their heads and walked slowly out of the parking lot together, turning to smile and wave at Jimmy and Caroline as they reached the boulevard.

Caroline stood there, slightly drunk, swaying on her high heels. She had a nice body, long hair. She seemed familiar, somehow.

"You're a real man, Jimmy," she told him. "I love you."

"Bullshit, bitch, you just want to suck my cock."

"Yes, *that* too, Jimmy!" Caroline laughed.

"You're gonna suck my cock, right now," Jimmy said. Suddenly he sounded mean.

"No, wait…Jimmy, that's too *fast*."

"You say you love me, then *suck* me."

"No, wait…"

Jimmy was pretty drunk. He had to be to act like that. There wasn't much light in that parking lot but it wasn't that dark either. But some guys were freaks. They liked to do it in public situations.

"You'll suck me, bitch, now…"

Jimmy unzipped, grabbed her by that long hair and forced her head down. I thought she was going to do it. She seemed to relent.

Then Jimmy screamed. *Screamed*.

She had bitten him. He pulled her up by the hair and hit her, fist closed, across the face. Then he dug a knee up between her legs and she fell, motionless.

She's out cold, I thought. Maybe I'll drag her back by those cans and fuck her after he drives off.

Damned if he didn't frighten me. I decided not to come out from behind those garbage cans. I clutched the Jimmy Foxx slugger and waited for him to leave.

I watched as he zipped up and walked gingerly to his car. He got the door open, climbed in and sat there a while. Then the lights flashed on and the engine kicked over.

He just sat there revving his motor.

Then I saw him climb out. The engine was still running. The lights were on.

He walked around to the front of the car.

“Hey!” he said loudly, “what’s zat? I see…you…”

He started moving toward me.

“…I see…you…who the fuck…is…hiding behind those cans? I see…you…come on outa there!”

He came toward me. The moon behind his back made him look like some god-forsaken creature out of a low budget horror film.

“You fucking roach!” he yelled, “I’ll stamp the piss out of you!”

He came at me. I was caught behind the garbage cans. I raised the Jimmy Foxx slugger, came down with it and caught him squarely on top of the head.

He didn’t drop. He just stood there staring at me. I hit him again. It was like an old time comedy movie in black and white. He just stood there and made a horrible face at me.

I slipped out from behind the garbage cans and started to walk away. He followed me.

I turned around.

“Leave me alone,” I told him. “Let’s forget it.”

“I’m going to kill you, punk!” he said.

Those two big hands reached for my throat. I ducked away and swung the bat at one of his kneecaps. There was a shot like a gun going off and he dropped.

“Let’s forget it,” I told him. “Let’s leave it like this.”

He was on his hands and knees, crawling after me.

“I’m gonna kill ya, punk!”

I put the wood to the back of his neck as hard as I could then. He was stretched out next to his unconscious friend. I looked at the girl, Caroline. It was the one with the fake fur. I decided I didn’t want it after all.

I ran over to the barkeep's car, switched the lights off, killed the engine, pulled the keys and threw them onto the roof of the building. Then I ran back to the bodies and got Jimmy's wallet.

I ran out of the lot, walked south a few feet, and said, "Shit!" I turned and ran back to the lot and the garbage cans. I had left my whiskey there. A fifth in a paper bag. I got it.

I went south again to the corner, crossed the street, found a mailbox, looked around. Nobody. I took the bills out of the wallet, dropped the wallet into the box.

Next I walked north until I came to the Hotel Helen. I went in, went up the stairway, knocked on the door.

"BETTY, IT'S BENNY! FOR CHRIST'S SAKE, OPEN UP!"

The door opened.

"Shit…what is it?" she asked.

"I've got some whiskey."

I got inside, put the chain on the door. She had the lights on. I marched around cutting them off. Then it was dark.

"What's the matter," she asked, "you crazy?"

I found the glasses and with a shaking hand poured two.

I took her to the window. The police cars were already there, lights blinking.

"What the hell happened?" she asked.

"Some guy busted Jimmy's sack," I said.

You could hear the ambulance coming. Then it was in the parking lot. They loaded the girl in first. Then they got Jimmy.

"Who got the girl?" Betty asked.

"Jimmy…"

"Who got Jimmy?"

"What the hell does it matter?"

I set my drink on the window sill and reached into my pocket. I counted out the bills. $480.

"Here, baby…"

I handed her $50.

"Jesus, thanks, Benny!"

"It's nothing…"

"Those horses must really be coming in!"

"Better than ever, baby…"

"Cheers!" she said lifting her glass.

"Cheers," I said, lifting mine.

We clicked glasses, then drank them off as the ambulance backed out, turned south, siren on.

It just wasn't our turn yet.

FOOLING MARIE

It was a warm night at the quarterhorse races. Ted had arrived carrying $200 and now going into the third race he was carrying $530. He knew his horses. Maybe he wasn't much good at anything else but he knew his horses. Ted stood watching the toteboard and looking at the people. They lacked any ability to rate a horse. But they still brought their money and their dreams to the track. The track ran a $2 exacta almost every race to lure them in. That and the Pick-6. Ted never touched the Pick-6 or the exactas or the doubles. Just straight win on the best horse, which wasn't necessarily the favorite.

Marie bitched so much about his going to the track that he only went two or three times a week. He had sold his company and retired early from the construction business. There really wasn't much else for him to do.

The four horse looked good at six-to-one but there was still 18 minutes to post. He felt a tug at his coat sleeve.

"Pardon me, sir, but I've lost the first two races. I saw you cashing in your tickets. You look like a guy who knows what he's doing. Who do you like in this next race?"

She was a strawberry blonde, about 24, slender hips, surprisingly big breasts; long legs, a cute turned-up nose, flower mouth; dressed in a pale blue dress, wearing white high-heeled shoes. Her blue eyes looked up at him.

"Well," Ted smiled at her, "I've usually got the winner."

"I'm used to betting on thoroughbreds," said the strawberry blonde. "These quarterhorse races are so *fast*!"

"Yeah. Most of them are run in under 18 seconds. You find out pretty quick whether you're right or wrong."

"If my mother knew I was out here losing my money she'd belt-whip me."

"I'd like to belt-whip you myself," said Ted.

"You're not one of those, are you?" she asked.

"Just joking," said Ted. "Come on, let's go to the bar. Maybe we can pick you a winner."

"All right, Mr.—?"

"Just call me Ted. What's your name?"

"Victoria."

They walked into the bar. "What'll you have?" Ted asked.

"Whatever you're having," said Victoria.

Ted ordered two Jack Daniels. He stood and knocked his off and she sipped at hers, looking straight ahead. Ted checked her ass: perfect. She was better than some god damned movie starlet, and she didn't look spoiled.

"Now," said Ted, pointing to his program, "in the next race the four horse figures best and they are giving six-to-one odds…"

Victoria let out a very sexy, "Oooh…?" She leaned over to look at his program, touching him with her arm. Then he felt her leg press against his.

"People just don't know how to rate a horse," he told her. "Show me a man who can rate a horse and I'll show you a man who can win all the money he can carry."

She smiled at him. "I wish I had going what you've got going."

"You've got plenty going, baby. Want another drink?"

"Oh no, thank you…"

"Well, listen," said Ted, "we better bet."

"All right, I'll bet $2 to win. Which is it, the number four horse?"

"Yeah, baby, it's the four…"

They placed their bets and went out to watch the race. The four didn't break well, got bumped on both sides, righted himself, was running fifth in a nine horse field, but then began to accelerate and came down to the wire bobbing heads with the two-to-one favorite. Photo.

God damn, thought Ted, I've *got* to have this one. Please give me *this* one!

"Oh," said Victoria, "I'm so *excited*!"

The toteboard flashed the number. *Four*.

Victoria screamed and jumped up and down gleefully. "We won, we won, we WON!"

She grabbed Ted and he felt the kiss on his cheek.

"Take it easy, baby, the best horse won, that's all."

They waited for the official sign and then the tote flashed the payoff. $14.60.

"How much did you bet?" Victoria asked.

"Forty win," said Ted.

"How much do you get back?"

"$292. Let's collect."

They began walking toward the windows. Then Ted felt Victoria's hand in his. She pulled him to a stop.

"Bend over," she said, "I want to whisper something in your ear."

Ted leaned over, felt her cool pink lips up against his ear. "You're a…magic man…I want to…fuck you…"

Ted stood there grinning weakly at her. "My god," he said.

"What's the matter? Are you afraid?"

"No, no, it's not that…"

"What is the matter then?"

"It's Marie…my wife…I'm married…and she has me timed down to the minute. She knows when the races are over and when I'm due in."

Victoria laughed: "We'll leave *now*! We'll go to a motel!"

"Well, sure," said Ted…

They cashed their tickets and walked out to the parking lot. "We'll take my car. I'll drive you back when we're finished," Victoria said.

They found her car, a blue 1982 Fiat, it matched her dress. The license plate read: VICKY. As she put her key in the door, Victoria hesitated. "You're really not one of those kind, are you?"

"What kind?" Ted asked.

"A belt-whipper, one of those. My mother had a terrible experience once…"

"Relax," said Ted. "I'm harmless."

They found a motel about a mile and a half from the track. The Blue Moon. Only The Blue Moon was painted green. Victoria parked and they got out, went in, signed in, were given Room 302. They had stopped for a bottle of Cutty Sark on the way.

Ted peeled the cellophane from the glasses, lit a cigarette, and poured a couple as Victoria undressed. The panties and the bra were pink, and the body was pink and white and beautiful. It was amazing how now and then a woman was created who looked like that, when all the others, most of the others, had nothing, or next to nothing. It was maddening. Victoria was a beautiful, maddening dream.

Victoria was naked. She came over and sat on the edge of the bed next to Ted. She crossed her legs. Her breasts were very firm and she looked as if she was already aroused. He really couldn't believe his luck. Then she giggled.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Are you thinking about your wife?"

"Well, no, I was thinking about something else."

"Well, you *should* think about your wife…"

"Hell," said Ted, "*you* were the one who suggested fucking!"

"I wish you wouldn't use that word…"

"Are you backing out?"

"Well, no. Listen, you got a cigarette?"

"Sure…"

Ted pulled one out, handed it to her, lighted it as she held it in her mouth.

"You've got the most beautiful body I've ever seen," said Ted.

"I don't doubt that," she said, smiling.

"Hey, are you backing out of this thing?" he asked.

"Of course not," she answered, "get your clothes off."

Ted began undressing, feeling fat and old and ugly, but he also felt lucky—it had been his best day at the track, in many ways. He draped his clothes over a chair and sat down next to Victoria.

Ted poured a new drink for each of them.

"You know," he told her, "you're a class act but I'm a class act too. We each have our own way of showing it. I made it big in the construction business and I'm still making it big with the horses. Not everybody has that instinct."

Victoria drank half of her Cutty Sark and smiled at him. "Oh, you're my big fat Buddha!"

Ted drained his drink. "Listen, if you don't want to do it, we won't do it. Forget it."

"Lemme see what Buddha's got…"

Victoria reached down and slid her hand between his legs. She got it, she held it.

"Oh oh…I feel something…" Victoria said.

"Sure…So what?"

Then her head ducked down. She kissed it at first. Then he felt her open mouth and her tongue.

"You *cunt*!" he said.

Victoria lifted her head up and looked at him. "*Please*, I don't like dirty talk."

"All right, Vicky, all right. No dirty talk."

"Get under the sheets, Buddha!"

Ted got under there and he felt her body next to his. Her skin was cool and her mouth opened and he kissed her and pushed his tongue in. He liked it like that, fresh, spring fresh, young, new, good. What a god damned delight. He'd rip her! He played with her down there, she was a long time coming around. Then he felt her open up and he forced his finger in. He had her, the bitch. He pulled his finger out and rubbed the clit. You want foreplay, you'll get foreplay! he thought.

He felt her teeth dig into his lower lip, the pain was terrible. Ted pulled away, tasting the blood and feeling the wound on his lip. He half rose and slapped Victoria hard across the side of her face, then backhanded her across the other side of the face. He found her, down there, slid it in, rammed it in her while putting his mouth back on hers. Ted worked away in wild vengeance, now and then pulling his head back, looking at her. He tried to save it, to hold back, and then he saw that cloud of strawberry hair fanned across the pillow in the moonlight.

Ted was sweating and moaning like a high school boy. This was it. Nirvana. The place to be. Victoria was silent. Ted's moans lessened and then after a moment he rolled off.

He stared into the darkness.

I forgot to suck her tits, he thought.

Then he heard her voice. "You know what?" she asked.

"What?"

"You remind me of one of those quarterhorses."

"What do you mean?"

"It's all over in 18 seconds."

"We'll race again, baby," he said…

She went to the bathroom. Ted wiped off on the sheet, the old pro. Victoria was rather a nasty number, in a way. But she could be handled. He had something going. How many men owned their own home and had 150 grand in the bank at his age? He was a class act and she damn well knew it.

Victoria came walking out of the bathroom still looking cool, untouched, almost virginal. Ted switched on the bedlamp. He sat up and poured two more. She sat on the edge of the bed with her drink and he climbed out and sat on the edge of the bed next to her.

"Victoria," he said, "I can make things good for you."

"I guess you've got your ways, Buddha."

"And I'll be a better lover."

"Sure."

"Listen, you should have known me when I was young. I was tough, but I was good. I had it. I still have it."

She smiled at him, "Come on, Buddha, it's not all that bad. You've got a wife, you've got lots of things going for you."

"Except one thing," he said, draining his drink and looking at her. "Except the one thing I really want…"

"Look at your *lip*! You're bleeding!"

Ted looked down into his glass. There were drops of blood in his drink and he felt blood on his chin. He wiped his chin with the back of his hand.

"I'm going to shower and clean up, baby, be right back."

He walked into the bathroom, slid the shower door open and began to run the water, testing it with his hand. It seemed about right and he stepped in, the water running off him. He could see the blood in the water running into the drain. Some wildcat. All she needed was a steadying hand.

Marie was all right, she was kind, kind of dull actually. She had lost the intensity of youth. It wasn't her fault. Maybe he could find a way to stay with Marie and have Victoria on the side. Victoria renewed his youth. He needed some fucking renewal. And he needed some more good fucking like that. Of course, women were all crazy, they demanded more than there was. They didn't realize that making it was not a glorious experience, but only a necessary one.

"Hurry up, Buddha!" he heard her call. "Don't leave me all alone out here!"

"I won't be long, baby!" he yelled from under the shower.

He soaped up good, washing it all away.

Then Ted got out, toweled off, then opened the bathroom door and stepped into the bedroom.

The motel room was empty. She was gone.

There was a distance between ordinary objects and between events that was remarkable. All at once, he saw the walls, the rug, the bed, two chairs, the coffee table, the dresser, and the ashtray with their cigarettes. The distance between these things was immense. Then and now were light years apart.

On an impulse, he ran to the closet and pulled the door open. Nothing but coat hangers.

Then Ted realized that his clothes were gone. His underwear, his shirt, his pants, his car keys and wallet, his cash, his shoes, his stockings, everything.

On another impulse he looked under the bed. Nothing.

Then Ted noticed the bottle of Cutty Sark, half full, standing on the dresser and he walked over, picked it up and poured himself a drink. And as he did he saw two words scrawled on the dresser mirror in pink lipstick: “GOODBYE BUDDHA!”

Ted drank the drink, put the glass down and saw himself in the mirror—very fat, very old. He had no idea what to do next.

He carried the Cutty Sark back to the bed, sat down heavily on the edge of the mattress where he and Victoria had sat together. He lifted the bottle and sucked at it as the bright neon lights from the boulevard came through the dusty blinds.

He sat, looking out, not moving, watching the cars passing back and forth.

About the Author

CHARLES BUKOWSKI is one of America's best-known contemporary writers of poetry and prose, and, many would claim, its most influential and imitated poet. He was born in Andernach, Germany, to an American soldier father and a German mother in 1920, and brought to the United States at the age of three. He was raised in Los Angeles and lived there for fifty years. He published his first story in 1944 when he was twenty-four and began writing poetry at the age of thirty-five. He died in San Pedro, California, on March 9, 1994, at the age of seventy-three, shortly after completing his last novel, *Pulp* (1994).

During his lifetime he published more than forty-five books of poetry and prose, including the novels *Post Office* (1971), *Factotum* (1975), *Women* (1978), *Ham on Rye* (1982), and *Hollywood* (1989). Among his most recent books are the posthumous editions of *What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire* (1999), *Open All Night: New Poems* (2000), *Beerspit Night and Cursing: The Correspondence of Charles Bukowski and Sheri Martinelli, 1960—1967* (2001), and *The Night Torn Mad with Footsteps: New Poems* (2001).

All of his books have now been published in translation in over a dozen languages and his worldwide popularity remains undiminished. In the years to come, Ecco will publish additional volumes of previously uncollected poetry and letters.

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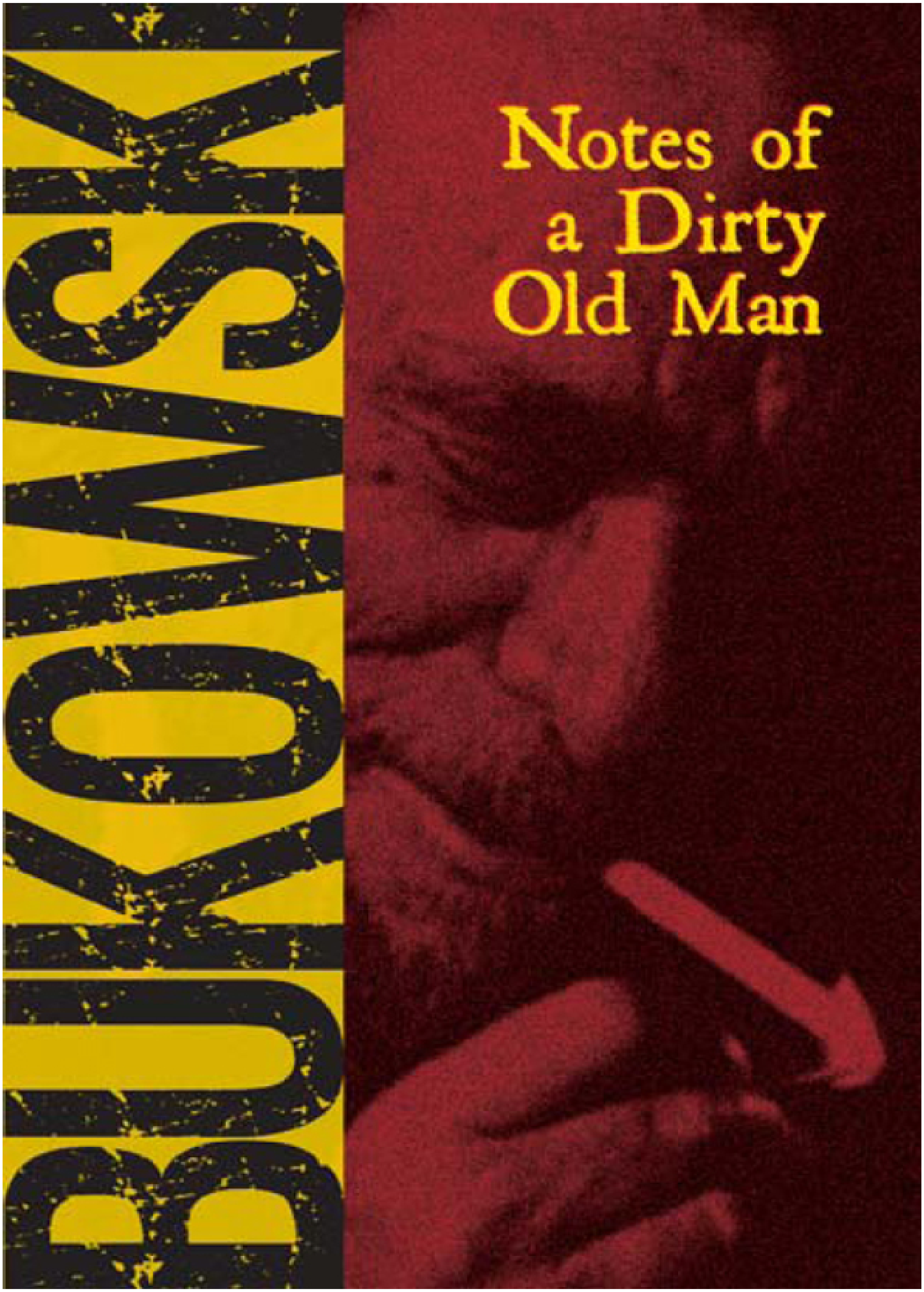
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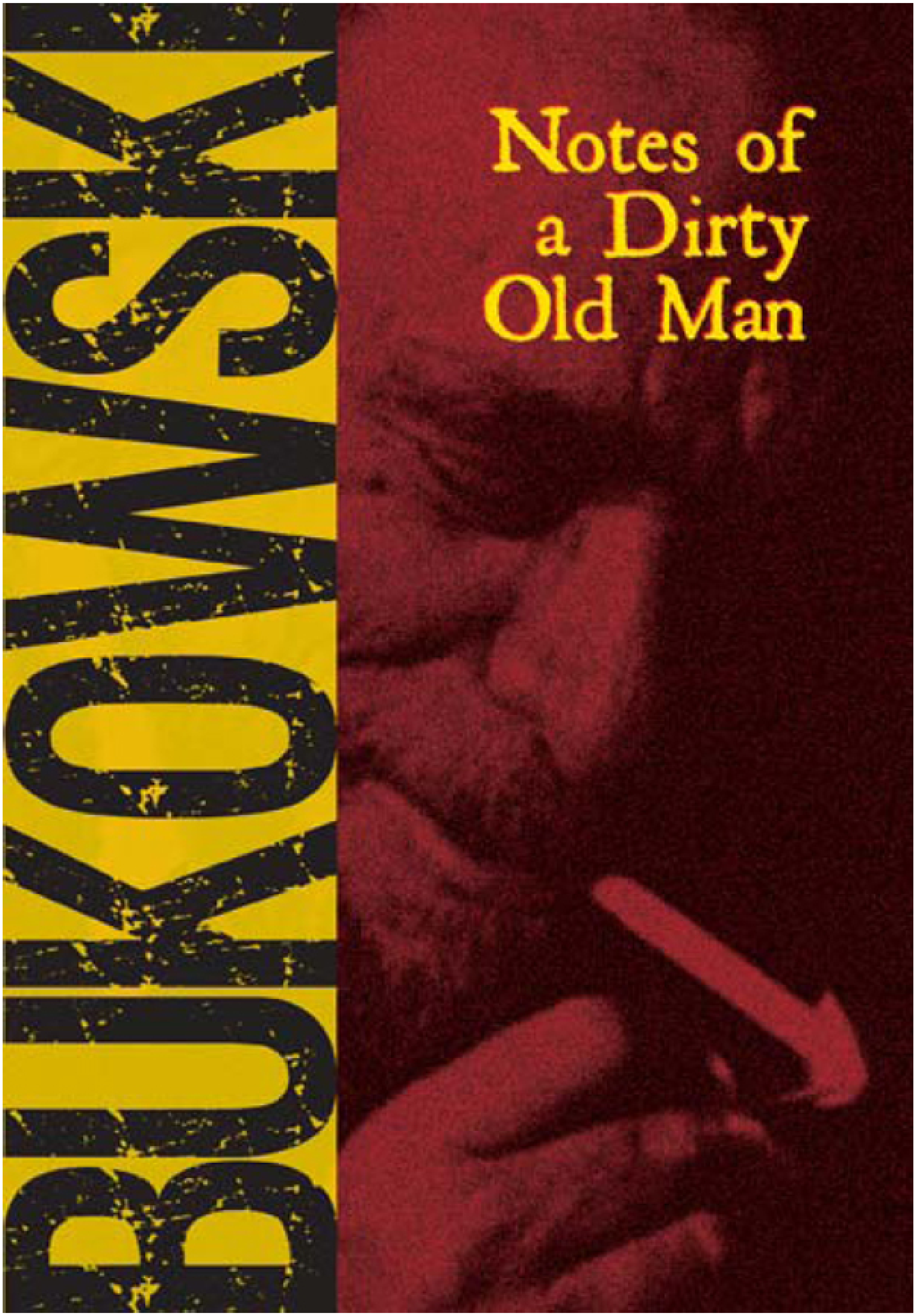
BUKOWSKI
Notes of a Dirty Old Man

NOTES OF A DIRTY OLD MAN

by Charles Bukowski

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NOTES OF A DIRTY OLD MAN

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FOREWORD

More than a year ago John Bryan began his underground paper OPEN CITY in the front room of a small two story house that he rented. Then the paper moved to an apartment in front, then to a place in the business district of Melrose Ave. Yet a shadow hangs. A helluva big gloomy one. The circulation rises but the advertising is not coming in like it should. Across in the better part of town stands the *L.A. Free Press* which has become established. And runs the ads. Bryan created his own enemy by first working for the *L.A. Free Press* and bringing their circulation from 16,000 to more than three times that. It's like building up the National Army and then joining the Revolutionaries. Of course, the battle isn't simply OPEN CITY vs. FREE PRESS. If you've read OPEN CITY, you know that the battle is larger than that. OPEN CITY takes on the big boys, the biggest boys, and there are some *big* ones coming down the center of the street, NOW, and real ugly big shits they are, too. It's more fun and more dangerous working for OPEN CITY, perhaps the liveliest rag in the U.S. But fun and danger hardly put margarine on the toast or fed the cat. You give up toast and end up eating the cat.

Bryan is a type of crazy idealist and romantic. He quit, or was fired, he quit *and* was fired — there was a lot of shit flying — from his job at the *Herald-Examiner* because he objected to them airbrushing the cock and balls off of the Christ child. This on the cover of their magazine for the Christmas issue. "And it's not even my God, it's theirs," he told me.

So this strange idealist and romantic created OPEN CITY. "How about doing us a weekly column?" he asked off-handedly, scratching his red beard. Well, you know, thinking of other columns and other columnists, it seemed to me to be a terribly drab thing to do. But I started out, not with a column but a review of *Papa Hemingway* by A. E. Hotchner. Then one day after the races, I sat down and wrote the heading, NOTES OF A DIRTY OLD MAN, opened a beer, and the writing got done by itself. There was not the tenseness or the careful carving with a bit of a dull blade, that was needed to write something for *The Atlantic Monthly*. Nor was there any need to simply tap out a flat and careless journalism (er, journalesé??). There seemed to be no pressures. Just sit by the window, lift the beer and let it come. Anything that wanted to arrive, arrived. And Bryan was never a problem. I'd hand him some copy — in the early days — and he'd flit through it and say, "OK, it's in." After a while I'd just hand him copy and he wouldn't read it; he'd just jam it into a cubbyhole and say, "It's in. What's going on?" Now he doesn't even say, "It's in." I just hand him the copy and that's that. It has helped the writing. Think of it yourself: absolute freedom to write anything you please. I've had a good time with it, and a serious time too, sometimes; but I felt mainly, as the weeks went on, that the writing got better and better. These are selections from about fourteen months worth of columns.

For action, it has poetry beat all to hell. Get a poem accepted and chances are it will come out 2 to 5 years later, and a 50-50 shot it will never appear, or exact lines of it will *later* appear, word for word, in some famous poet's work, and then you know the world ain't much. Of course, this isn't the fault of poetry; it is only that so many shits attempt to print and write it. But with NOTES, sit down with a beer and hit the typer on a Friday or a Saturday or a Sunday and by Wednesday the thing is all over the city. I get letters from people who have never read poetry, mine or anybody else's. People come to my door — too many of them really — and knock to tell me that NOTES OF A DIRTY OLD MAN turns them on. A bum off the road brings in a gypsy and his wife and we talk, bullshit, drink half the night. A long distance telephone operator from Newburgh, N.Y., sends me money. She wants me to give up drinking beer and to eat well. I hear from a madman who calls himself "King Arthur" and lives on Vine Street in Hollywood and wants to help me write my column. A doctor comes to my door: “I read your column and I think that I can help you. I used to be a psychiatrist.” I send him away.

I hope that these selections help you. If you want to send me money, o.k. Or if you want to hate me, o.k. too. If I were the village blacksmith you wouldn’t fuck with me. But I am just an old guy with some dirty stories. Writing for a newspaper, which, like me, might die tomorrow morning.

It’s all very strange. Just think, if they hadn’t airbrushed the cock and balls off the Christ child, you wouldn’t be reading this. So, be happy.

Charles Bukowski
1969

NOTES OF A DIRTY OLD MAN

some son of a bitch had held out on the money, everybody claiming they were broke, card game finished, I was sitting there with my buddy Elf, Elf was screwed-up as a kid, all shriveled, he used to lay in bed for years squeezing these rubber balls, doing crazy exercises, and when he got out of bed one day he was as wide as he was tall, a muscled laughing brute who wanted to be a writer but he wrote too much like Thomas Wolfe and, outside of Dreiser, T. Wolfe was the worst American writer ever born, and I hit Elf behind the ear and the bottle fell off the table (he'd said something that I disagreed with) and as the Elf came up I had the bottle, good scotch, and I got him half on the jaw and part of the neck under there and he went down again, and I felt on top of my game, I was a student of Dostoevski and listened to Mahler in the dark, and I had time to drink from the bottle, set it down, fake with a right and lend him the left just below the belt and he fell against the dresser, clumsily, the mirror broke, it made sounds like a movie, flashed and crinkled and then Elf landed one high on my forehead and I fell back across a chair and the thing flattened like straw, cheap furniture, and then I was in deep — I had small hands and no real taste for fighting and I hadn't put him away — and he came on in like some zany two-bit vengeful individual, and I got in about one for three, not very good ones, but he wouldn't quit and the furniture was breaking everywhere, very much noise and I kept hoping somebody would stop the damned thing — the landlady, the police, God, anybody, but it went on and on and on, and then I didn't remember.

when I awakened the sun was up and I was *under* the bed. I got out from under and found that I could stand up. large cut under chin. scraped knuckles. I'd had worse hangovers. and there were worse places to awaken, like jail? maybe. I looked around. it *had* been real. everything broken and smeared and shattered, spilled — lamps, chairs, dresser, bed, ashtrays — gored beyond all measure, nothing sensible, everything ugly and finished. I drank some water and then walked to the closet. it was still there: tens, twenties, fives, the money I had thrown into the closet each time I had gone to piss during the card game, and I remembered starting the fight about the MONEY. I gathered up the green, placed it in my wallet, put my paper suitcase on the slanting bed and began to pack my few rags: laborer's shirts, stiff shoes with holes in the bottom, hard and dirty stockings, lumpy pants with legs that wanted to laugh, a short story about catching crabs at the San Francisco Opera House, and a torn Thrifty Drugstore dictionary — "palingenesis — recapitulation of ancestral stages in life-history."

the clock was working, the old alarm clock, god bless it, how many times had I looked at it on 7:30 a.m. hangover mornings and said, fuck the job? FUCK THE JOB! well, it said 4 p.m. I was just about to put it into the top of my suitcase when — sure, why not? — there was a knock on my door.

YEAH?

MR. BUKOWSKI?

YEAH? YEAH?

I WANT TO COME IN AND CHANGE THE SHEETS.

NO, NOT TODAY. I'M SICK TODAY.

OH, THAT'S TOO BAD. BUT JUST LET ME COME IN AND CHANGE THE SHEETS. THEN I'LL GO AWAY.

NO, NO, I'M TOO SICK, I'M JUST TOO SICK. I DON'T WANT YOU TO SEE ME THE WAY I AM.

it went on and on. she wanted to change the sheets. I said, no. she said, I want to change the sheets. on and on. that landlady. what a body. all body. everything about her screamed BODY BODY BODY. I'd only been there 2 weeks. there was a bar downstairs. people would come to see me, I wouldn't be in, she'd just say, "he's in the bar downstairs, he's always in the bar downstairs." and the people would say, "God and Jesus, man, who's your LANDLADY?"

but she was a big white woman and she went for these Filipinos, these Filipinos did tricks man, things no white men would ever dream of, even me; and these Flips are gone now with their George Raft pulldown widebrims and padded-shoulders; they used to be the fashion leaders, the stiletto boys; leather heels, greasy evil faces — where have you gone?

well, anyhow, there was nothing to drink and I sat there for hours, going crazy; jumpy, I was, gnatz, lumpy balls, there I sat with $450 easy money and I couldn't buy a draft beer. I was waiting for darkness. darkness, not death. I wanted out. another shot at it. I finally got the nerve up. I opened the door a bit, chain still on, and there was one, a little Flip monkey with a hammer. when I opened the door, he lifted the hammer and grinned. when I closed the door he took the tacks out of his mouth and pretended to pound them into the rug of the stairway leading to the first floor and the only door out. I don't know how long it went on. it was the same act. everytime I'd open the door he'd lift the hammer and grin. *shit monkey!* he just stayed on the top step. I began to go crazy. I was sweating, stinking; little circles whirling whirling whirling, light flanks and flashes of light in my dome. I really felt like I was going to go screwy. I walked over and got the suitcase. it was easy to carry. rags. then I took the typewriter. a steel portable borrowed from the wife of a once-friend and never returned. it had a good solid feel: gray, flat, heavy, leery, banal. the eyes whirled to the rear of my head and the chain was off the door, and one hand with suitcase and one hand with stolen typewriter I charged into machinegun fire, the mourning morning sunrise, cracked-wheat crinkles, the end of all.

HEY! WHERE YOU GO?

the little monkey began to raise to one knee, he raised the hammer, and that's all I needed — the flash of electric light on hammer — I had the suitcase in the left hand, the portable steel typer in the right, he was in perfect position, down by my knees and I swung with great accuracy and some anger, I gave him the flat and heavy and hard side, greatly, along the side of his head, his skull, his temple, his being.

there was almost a shock of light like everything was crying, then it was still. I was outside, suddenly, sidewalk, down all those steps without realization. like luck, there was a yellow cab.

CABBY!

I was inside. UNION STATION.

it was good, the quiet sound of tires in the morning air. NO, WAIT, I said. MAKE IT THE BUS DEPOT.

WHATZ MATTA, MAN? the cabby asked.

I JUST KILLED MY FATHER.

YO KILLED YO FATHA?

YOU EVER HEARD OF JESUS CHRIST?

SHORE.

THEN MAKE IT: BUS DEPOT.

I sat in the bus depot for an hour waiting for the bus to New Orleans. wondering if I had killed the guy. I finally got on with typewriter and suitcase, jamming the typewriter far into the overhead rack, not wanting the thing to fall on my head. it was a long ride with much drinking and some involvement with a redhead from Fort Worth. I got off at Fort Worth too, but she lived with her mother and I had to get a room, and I got a room in a whorehouse by mistake. all night the women hollering things like, “HEY! you’re not going to stick THAT thing in ME for ANY kind of money!” toilets flushing all night. doors opening and closing.

the redhead, she was a nice innocent thing, or bargained for a better man. anyhow, I left town without getting into her pants. I finally made New Orleans.

but the Elf. remember? the guy I fought in my room. well, during the war he was killed by machinegun fire. I’ve heard he lay in bed a long time, 3 or 4 weeks before he went. and the *strangest* thing, he had told me, no, he had *asked* me “suppose some STUPID son of a bitch puts his finger to a machinegun and cuts me in half?"

"then, it's your fault."

"well, I know you ain't going to die in front of any god damned machinegun."

"you're sure as shit right, I ain't, babe. unless it's one of Uncle Sam's."

"don't give me that crap! I know you love your country. I can see it in your eyes! love, real love!"

that's when I hit him the first time.

after that, you've got the rest of the story.

when I got to New Orleans I made sure I wasn't in any whorehouse, even though the whole town looked like one.

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we were sitting in the office after dropping another one of those 7 to 1 ballgames, and the season was halfway over and we were in the cellar, 25 games out of first place and I knew that it was my last season as manager of the Blues. our leading hitter was batting .243 and our leading home run man had 6. our leading pitcher stood at 7 and 10 with an e.r.a. of 3.95. old man Henderson pulled the pint out of the desk drawer, took his cut, shoved the bottle at me.

"on top of all this," said Henderson, "I even caught the crabs about 2 weeks ago."

"jesus, sorry, boss."

"you won't be calling me boss much longer."

"I know, but no manager in baseball can pull *these* rummies out of last place," I said, knocking off a third of a pint.

"and worse," said Henderson, "I think it was my wife who gave me the crabs."

I didn't know whether to laugh or what, so I kept quiet.

there was a most delicate knock on the office door and then it opened. and here stood some nut with paper wings glued to his back.

it was a kid about 18. "I'm here to help your club," said the kid.

he had on these big paper wings. a real nut. holes cut in his suit. the wings are glued to his back. or strapped. or something.

"listen," said Henderson, "will you please get the hell out of here! we've got enough comedy on the field now, just playing it straight. they laughed us right out of the park today. now, get *out* and *fast!*"

the kid reached over, took a slug from the pint, set it down and said, "Mr. Henderson, I am the answer to your prayers."

"kid," said Henderson, "you're too young to drink that stuff."

"I'm older than I look," said the kid.

"and I got somethin' that will make you a little older!" Henderson pressed the little button under his desk. that meant Bull Kronkite. I ain't sayin' the Bull has ever killed a man but you'll be lucky to be smoking Bull Durham out of a rubber asshole when he gets through with you. the Bull came in almost taking one of the hinges off the door as he entered.

"which ONE, boss?" he asked, his long stupid fingers twitching as he looked about the room.

"the punk with the paper wings," said Henderson.

the Bull moved in.

"don't touch me," said the punk with the paper wings.

the Bull rushed in, AND SO HELP ME GOD, that punk began to FLY! he flapped around the room, up near the ceiling. Henderson and I both reached for the pint but the old man beat me to it. the Bull dropped to his knees: "LORD IN HEAVEN, HAVE MERCY ON ME! AN ANGEL! AN ANGEL!"

"don't be a jerk!" said the angel, flapping around, "I'm no angel. I just want to help the Blues. I been a Blues fan ever since I can remember."

"all right. come on down. let's talk business," said Henderson.

the angel, or whatever it was, flew on down and landed in a chair. the Bull ripped off the shoes and stockings of whatever it was and started kissing its feet.

Henderson leaned over and in a very disgusted manner spit into the Bull's face: "fuck off, you subnormal freak! anything I hate is such sloppy sentimentality!"

the Bull wiped off his face and left very quietly.

Henderson flipped through the desk drawers.

“shit, I thought I had me some contract papers in here somewhere!”

meanwhile, while looking for the contract papers he found another pint and opened that. he looked at the kid while ripping off the cellophane: “tell me, can you hit an inside curve? outside? how about the slider?”

“god damned if I know,” said the guy with the wings, “I been hiding out. all I know is what I read in the papers and see on TV but I’ve always been a Blues fan and I’ve felt very sorry for you this season.”

“you been hidin’ out? *where?* a guy with wings can’t hide out in an elevator in the Bronx! what’s your *hype?* how’ve you made it?”

“Mr. Henderson, I don’t want to bore you with all the details.”

“by the way, what’s your name, kid?”

“Jimmy. Jimmy Crispin. J.C. for short.”

“hey, kid, what the fuck you tryin’ to do, get funny with *me?*”

“oh *no*, Mr. Henderson.”

“then shake hands!”

they shook.

“god damn, your hands is sure COLD! you had anything to eat lately?”

“I had some french fries and beer with chicken about 4 p.m.”

“have a drink, kid.”

Henderson turned to me. “Bailey?”

“yeh?”

“I want the full friggin’ ballteam down on that field at 10 a.m. tomorrow morning. no exceptions. I think we’ve got the biggest thing since the a-bomb. now let’s all get outa here and get some sleep. you got a place to sleep, kid?”

“sure,” said J.C. then he flew down the stairway and left us there.

we had the park locked tight. nobody in there but the ballteam. and with their hangovers and looking at the guy with the wings they thought it was some publicity gag. or a practice for one. they put the team on the field and the kid at the plate. but you should have been there to see those bloodshot eyes OPEN when the kid tapped a roller down the 3rd base line and FLEW to first base! then he touched down and before the 3rd base man could let go of the ball the kid flew on down to 2nd base.

everybody just kind of swayed in the early 10 p.m. sunlight. playing for a team like the Blues you figured you were crazy anyway but this was something else.

then as the pitcher got ready to throw to the batboy who we had put at the plate, J.C. flew on down to third base! he jetted on down! you couldn't even *see* the wings, even if you had had time for two alka seltzers that morning. and by the time the ball got to the plate, this thing had flown in and touched home plate.

we found the kid could play the *whole* outfield. his flying speed was tremendous! we just brought in the two other outfielders and put them in the infield. that gave us two shortstops and two second basemen. and as *bad* as we were, we were hell.

that night would be our first league game with Jimmy Crispin in the outfield.

first thing I did when I got in was to phone Bugsy Malone.

"Bugsy, what are the odds against the Blues finishing first?"

"ain't no odds. the bet is off the board. no damn fool would bet the Blues even at 10,000 to one."

"what'll you give me?"

"are you serious?"

"yeah."

"250 to one. you wanna bet a dollar, is that it?"

"one grand."

"one *grand!* now wait a minute! let me call you back in two hours."

the phone rang in an hour and forty-five minutes. "all right, I'll take you. I can always use a grand. somehow."

"thanks, Bugsy."

"you're welcome."

that first night game, I'll never forget it. they thought we were pulling some laugh stunt to get the crowds in but when they saw Jimmy Crispin rise into the sky and pull down an obvious home run that would have cleared the left centerfield fence by ten feet, then the game was on. Bugsy had flown down to check things out and I watched him in his box seat. when J.C. flew up to grab that one Bugsy's five dollar cigar dropped out of his mouth. but there was nothing in the rulebook that said a man with wings couldn't play baseball so we had them by the balls. and how. we took that game easy. Crispin scored 4 times. they couldn't hit anything out of our infield and anything in the outfield was a sure out.

and the games that followed. how the crowds came in. it was enough to drive them mad to see a man flying in the sky but the fact that we were 25 games out and with such little time left was also what kept them coming. the crowd loves to see a man get off the deck. the Blues were driving. it was the miracle of the times.

LIFE came to interview Jimmy. TIME. LIFE. LOOK. he told them nothing. "I just want to see the Blues win the pennant," he said.

but it was still tough, mathematically, and like a storybook ending it came down to the last game of the season, tied with the Bengals for first place and playing the Bengals, and winner take all. we hadn't lost a game since Jimmy joined the team. and I was pretty close to $250,000.00. what a manager I was!

we were in the office just before that last night game, old man Henderson and I. and we heard the noise on the stairway, and then a guy fell through the door, drunk. J.C. his wings were gone. just stumps.

"they sawed off my motherfucking wings, the rats! they put this woman on me in the hotel room. what a woman! what a broad! man, they loaded my drinks! I got on top of this cunt and they began SAWING MY WINGS OFF. I couldn't move! I couldn't even get my nuts! what a FARCE! and all the time, this guy smoking a cigar, laughing and cackling in the background … — oh god, what a beautiful woman, and I couldn't get it … — oh, shit …"

"well, baby, you aren't the first guy a woman has fucked-up. is there any bleeding?" asked Henderson.

"no, it's just bone, a bone-thing, but I'm so sad, I've let you fellows down, I've let the Blues down, I feel terrible, terrible, terrible."

they felt terrible? I was out 250 grand.

I finished the pint on the desk. J.C. was too drunk to play, wings or no wings. Henderson just put his head down on the desk and began crying. I found his luger in the bottom drawer. I put it into my coat and went out of the tower and down into the reserve section. I took the box right behind Bugsy Malone and some beautiful woman he was sitting with. it was Henderson's box and Henderson was drinking himself to death with a dead angel. he wouldn't need that box. and the team wouldn't need me. I'd phoned down to the dugout and told them to turn the thing over to the batboy or somebody.

"hello, Bugsy," I said.

it was our field so they had first at bats.

"where's your center fielder? I don't see him," said Bugsy, lighting up a five buck cigar.

"our center fielder has gone back to heaven due to one of your $3.50 Sears-Roebuck hacksaws."

Bugsy laughed. "a guy like me can piss in a mule's eye and come up with a mint julep. that's why I am where I am."

"who's the beautiful lady?" I asked.

"oh, this is Helena. Helena, this is Tim Bailey, the worst manager in baseball."

Helena crossed those nylon things called legs and I forgave Crispin for everything.

"nice to meetcha, Mr. Bailey."

"yeah."

the game began. it was old times. by the 7th inning we were behind 10 to 0. Bugsy was feeling damn good by then, feeling this broad's legs, rubbing up against her, having the whole world in his pocket. he turned to me and handed me a five buck cigar. I lit up.

"was this guy really an angel?" he asked me, kind of smiling.

"he said to call him J.C. for short, but damned if I know."

"looks like Man has beat God nearly everytime they have tangled," he said.

"I don't know," I said, "but the way I figure it, cutting a man's wings off is kind of like cutting his cock off."

"maybe so. but the way I see it, the strong make things go."

"or death makes things stop. which one *is* it?"

I pulled the luger out and put it at the back of his head.

"for Christ's sake, Bailey! get hold of yourself! I'll give you half of everything I've got! no, I'll give you everything I've got — this broad, everything, the works — just take that gun away from my head!"

"if you think killing is strong, then TASTE some strong!"

I pulled the trigger. it was awful. a luger. parts of eggshell head, and brain and blood everywhere: over me, over her nylon legs, her dress …

the game was held up an hour while they got us out of there — the dead Bugsy, his crazy hysterical woman, and me. then they finished out the innings.

God over Man; Man over God. mother preserved strawberries while everything was so very sick.

it was the next day in my cell when the screw handed me the paper:

"BLUES PULL IT OUT IN 14th INNING, WIN 12-11 GAME AND PENNANT."

I walked to the cell window, 8 floors up. I balled the paper up and jammed it through the bars, I jammed and jolted the paper up and shoved it through the bars and as it fell through the air I watched it, it spread, it seemed to have wings, well, horseshit on that, it floated down like any piece of unfolding paper does, toward the sea, those white and blue waves down there and I couldn't touch them, God beat Man always and continually, God being Whatever It Was — a cocksucker machinegun or the painting of Klee, well, and now, those nylon legs folding around another damn fool. Malone owed me 250 grand and couldn't pay off. J.C. with wings, J.C. without wings, J.C. on a cross, I was still a little alive and I walked back across the floor, sat upon that prison pot without a lid and began to shit, x-major league manager, x-man, and a slight wind came through the bars and a slight way to go.

* * *

it was hot in there. I went to the piano and played the piano. I didn't know how to play the piano. I just hit the keys. some people danced on the couch. then I looked under the piano and saw a girl stretched out under there, her dress up around her hips. I played with one hand, reached under and copped a feel with the other. either the bad music or copping that feel woke up the girl. she climbed out from under the piano. the people stopped dancing on the couch. I made it to the couch and slept for fifteen minutes. I hadn't slept for two nights and two days. it was hot in there, hot. when I awakened I vomited in a coffee cup. then that was full and I had to let go on the couch. somebody brought a large pot. just in time. I let it go. sour. everything was sour.

I got up and walked into the bathroom. two guys were in there naked. one of them had some shaving cream and a brush and was lathering up the other guy's cock and balls.

"listen, I got to take a shit," I told them.

"go ahead," said the guy being lathered, "we ain't bothering you."

I went ahead and sat down.

the guy with the brush said to the guy being lathered, "I hear Simpson got fired from Club 86."

"KPFK," said the other guy, "they can more people than Douglas Aircraft, Sears Roebuck and Thrifty Drugs combined. one wrong word, one sentence out of line with their pre-baked conceptions of humanity, politics, art, so forth, and you've had it. the only safe guy on KPFK is Eliot Mintz — he's like a kid's toy accordion: no matter how you squeeze him you get the same sound."

"now go ahead," said the guy with the brush.

"go ahead what?"

"rub your dick until it gets hard."

I dropped a big one.

"jesus!" said the guy with the brush, but he no longer had the brush. he'd thrown it in the sink.

"jesus what?" said the other guy.

"you got a head on that thing like a mallet!"

"I had an accident once, it caused it."

"I wish I could have an accident that way."

I dropped another one.

"now go ahead."

"go ahead what?"

"bend way back and slip it between your upper legs."

"like this?"

"yeah."

"now what?"

"bring your belly down. slide it. back and forth. make your legs tight. that's it! see! you'll never need another woman!"

"oh Harry, it just *ain't* like pussy! what you giving me? you're giving me a lot of shit!"

"it just takes PRACTICE! you'll see! you'll see!"

I wiped, flushed and got out of there.

I went to the refrigerator and got another can of beer, I got 2 cans of beer, opened them both and began on the first one. I figured that I was someplace in North Hollywood. I sat across from some guy with a red tin helmet on and a two foot beard. he'd been brilliant for a couple of nights but was coming down off the speed and was out of speed. but he hadn't hit the sleep stage yet, just the sad and vacant stage. just maybe hoping for a joint but nobody was showing anything.

"Big Jack," I said.

"Bukowski, you owe me 40 dollars," said Big Jack.

"listen, Jack, I have this idea that I gave you 20 dollars the other night. I really have this idea. I remember this 20."

"but you don't *remember*, *do* you Bukowski? because you were *drunk*, Bukowski, that's why you don't remember!"

Big Jack had this thing against drunks.

his girl friend Maggy was sitting next to him. "you gave him a 20, all right, but it was because you wanted some more to drink. we went out and got you some stuff and brought you the change."

"all right. but where are we? North Hollywood?"

"no, Pasadena."

"Pasadena? I don't believe it."

I had been watching these people go behind this big curtain. some of them came out in ten or twenty minutes. some of them never came out. it had been going on for 48 hours. I finished the 2nd beer, got up, pulled the curtain back and went in there. it was very dark in there but I smelled grass. and ass. I stood there and let my eyes adjust. it was mostly guys. licking assholes. reaming. sucking. it was not for me. I was square. it was like the men's gym after everybody had worked out on the parallel bars. and the sour smell of semen. I gagged. a light colored negro came up to me.

"hey, you're Charles Bukowski, aren't you?"

"yeh," I said.

"wow! this is the thrill of my life! I read *CRUCIFIX IN A DEATHHAND*. I consider you the greatest since Verlaine!"

"Verlaine?"

"yeah, Verlaine!"

he reached out and cupped a hand around my balls. I took his hand away.

"what's the matter?" he asked.

"not just yet, baby, I'm looking for a friend."

"oh, sorry ..."

he walked on off. I kept looking around and was just about ready to leave when I noticed a woman kind of leaning against a far corner. she had her legs open but seemed rather dazed. I walked on over and looked at her. I dropped my pants and shorts. she looked all right. I put the thing in. I put in what I had.

"oooh," she said, "it's good! you're so curved! like a gaff!"

"accident I had when I was a child. something with the tricycle."

"oooooh …"

I was just going good when something RAMMED into the cheeks of my ass. I saw flashes before my eyes.

"hey, what the HELL!" I reached and pulled the thing out. I was standing there with this guy's thing in my hand. "what do you think you're doing, buddy?" I asked him.

"listen, friend," he said, "this whole game is just one big deck of cards. if you want to get into the game you have to take whatever comes up in the shuffle."

I pulled up my shorts and pants and got out of there.

Big Jack and Maggy were gone. a couple of people were passed out on the floor. I went and got another beer, drank that and walked outside. the sunlight hit me like a squad car with the red lights on. I found my short pushed into somebody else's driveway with a parking ticket on it. but there was still room to get out of the driveway. everybody knew just how far to go. it was nice.

I stopped at the Standard Station and the man told me how to get on the Pasadena freeway. I made it home. sweating. biting my lips to stay awake. there was a letter in the mailbox from my x-wife in Arizona.

"… I know you get lonely and depressed. when you do, you ought to go to The Bridge. I think that you would like those people. or some of them, anyhow. or you ought to go to the poetry readings at the Unitarian Church …"

I let the water run into the bathtub, good and hot. I undressed, found a beer, drank half, set the can on the ledge and got into the tub, took the lather and the brush and began dabbing at the string and knobs.

I met Kerouac's boy Neal C. shortly before he went down to lay along those Mexican railroad tracks to die. his eyes were sticking out on ye old toothpicks and he had his head in the speaker, jogging, bouncing, ogling, he was in a white t-shirt and seemed to be singing like a cuckoo bird along with the music, *preceding* the beat just a shade as if he were leading the parade. I sat down with my beer and watched him. I'd brought in a six pack or two. Bryan was handing out an assignment and some film to two young guys who were going to cover that show that kept getting busted. whatever happened to that show by the Frisco poet, I forget his name. anyhow, nobody was noticing Neal C. and Neal C. didn't care, or he pretended not to. when the song stopped, the 2 young guys left and Bryan introduced me to the fab Neal C.

"have a beer?" I asked him.

Neal plucked a bottle out, tossed it in the air, caught it, ripped the cap off and emptied the half-quart in two long swallows.

"have another."

"sure."

"I thought I was good on the beer."

"I'm the tough young jail kid. I've read your stuff."

"read your stuff too. that bit about climbing out the bathroom window and hiding in the bushes naked. good stuff."

"oh yeah." he worked at the beer, he never sat down. he kept moving around the floor. he was a little punchy with the action, the eternal light, but there wasn't any hatred in him. you liked him even though you didn't want to because Kerouac had set him up for the sucker punch and Neal had bit, kept biting. but you know Neal was o.k. and another way of looking at it, Jack had only written the book, he wasn't Neal's mother. just his destructor, deliberate or otherwise.

Neal was dancing around the room on the Eternal High. his face looked old, pained, all that, but his body was the body of a boy of eighteen.

"you want to try him, Bukowski?" asked Bryan.

"yeah, ya wanta go, baby?" he asked me.

again, no hatred. just going with the game.

"no, thanks. I'll be forty-eight in August. I've taken my last beating."

I couldn't have handled him.

"when was the last time you saw Kerouac?" I asked.

I think he said 1962, 1963. anyhow, a long time back.

I just about stayed with Neal on the beer and had to go out and get some more. the work at the office was about done and Neal was staying at Bryan's and B. invited me over for dinner. I said, "all right," and being a bit high I didn't realize what was going to happen.

when we got outside a very light rain was just beginning to fall. the kind that really fucks up the streets. I still didn't know. I thought Bryan was going to drive. but Neal got in and took the wheel. I had the back seat anyhow. B. got up in front with Neal. and the ride began. straight along those slippery streets and it would seem we were past the corner and then Neal would decide to take a right or a left. past parked cars, the dividing line just a hair away. it can only be described as hairline. a tick the other way and we were all finished.

after we cleared I would always say something ridiculous like, "well, suck my dick!" and Bryan would laugh and Neal would just go on driving, neither grim or happy or sardonic, just there — doing the movements. I understood. it was necessary. it was his bull ring, his racetrack. it was *holy* and necessary.

the best one was just off Sunset, going north toward Carlton. the drizzle was good now, ruining both the vision and the streets. turning off of Sunset, Neal picked up his next move, full-speed chess, it had to be calculated in an instant's glance. a left on Carlton would bring us to Bryan's. we were a block off. there was one car ahead of us and two approaching. now, he could have slowed down and followed the traffic in but he would have lost his *movement*. not Neal. he swung out around the car ahead of us and I thought, this is it, well, it doesn't matter, really it doesn't matter at all. that's the way it goes through your brain, that's the way it went through my brain.

the two cars plunged at each other, head-on, the other so close that the headlights flooded my back seat. I do think that at the last second the other driver touched his brake. that gave us the hairline. it must have been figured in by Neal. that movement. but it wasn't over. we were going very high speed now and the other car, approaching slowly from Hollywood Blvd. was just about blocking a left on Carlton. I'll always remember the color of that car. we got that close. a kind of gray-blue, an old car, coupe, humped and hard like a rolling steel brick thing. Neal cut left. to me it looked as if we were going to ram right through the center of the car. it was obvious. but somehow, the motion of the other car's forward and our movement left coincided perfectly. the hairline was there. once again. Neal parked the thing and we went on in. Joan brought the dinner in.

Neal ate all of his plate and most of mine too. we had a bit of wine. John had a highly intelligent young homosexual baby-sitter, who I now think has gone on with some rock band or killed himself or something. anyhow, I pinched his buttocks as he walked by. he loved it.

I think I stayed long past my time, drinking and talking with Neal. the baby-sitter kept talking about Hemingway, somehow equating me with Hemingway until I told him to shove it and he went upstairs to check Jason. it was a few days later that Bryan phoned me: "Neal's dead, Neal died."

"oh shit, no."

then Bryan told me something about it. hung up.

that was it.

all those rides, all those pages of Kerouac, all that jail, to die alone under a frozen Mexican moon, alone, you understand? can't you see the miserable puny cactii? Mexico is not a bad place because it is simply oppressed; Mexico is simply a bad place. can't you see the desert animals watching? the frogs, horned and simple, the snakes like slits of men's minds crawling, stopping, waiting, dumb under a dumb Mexican moon. reptiles, flicks of things, looking across this guy in the sand in a white t-shirt.

Neal, he'd found his movement, hurt nobody. the tough young jail kid laying it down alongside a Mexican railroad track.

the only night I met him I said, "Kerouac has written all your other chapters. I've already written your last one."

"go ahead," he said, "write it."

end copy.

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the summers are longer where the suicides hang and the flies eat mudpie. he's a famous street poet of the '50's and still alive. I throw my bottle into the canal, it's Venice, and Jack is holing up at the place for a week or so, giving a reading somewhere in a few days. the canal looks strange, very strange.

"hardly deep enough for self-destruction."

"yeah," he says in the Bronx movie voice, "you're right."

he's gray at 37. hook-nose. slumped. energetic. pissed. male. very male. a little Jewish smile. maybe he's not Jewish. I don't ask him.

he's known them all. pissed on Barney Rosset's shoe at a party because he didn't like something Barney said. Jack knows Ginsberg, Creeley, Lamantia, on and on, and now he knew Bukowski.

"yeah, Bukowski came to Venice to see me. scars all over his face. shoulders slumped. very tired-looking man. doesn't say much and when he does it's kind of dull, kind of commonplace. you'd never think he'd written all those books of poems. but he's been in the post office too long. he's slipped. they've eaten his spirit out. damn shame, but you know how it works. but he's still boss, real boss, you know."

Jack knows the inside, and it's funny but real to know that people aren't much, it's all a motherfucking jive, and you've known it but it's funny to hear it said while sitting by a Venice canal trying to cure an extra-size hangover.

he goes through a book. photographs of poets mostly. I am not in there. I began late and lived too long alone in small rooms drinking wine. they always figure that a hermit is insane, and they may be right.

he goes through the book. jesus christ, it's a catsass sitting there with that hangover and the water down there, and here is Jack going through the book, I see spots of sunlight, noses, ears, the sheen of the photographic pages. I don't care, but I guess we need something to talk about and I don't talk well and he is doing the work, so here we go, Venice canal, the whole chickenshit sadness of living it out — "this guy went nuts about 2 years ago."

"this guy wanted me to suck his dick in order to get my book published."

"did you?"

"did I? I belted him out! wit' dis!"

he shows me the Bronx fist.

I laugh. he's comfortable and he's human. every man is afraid of being a queer. I get a little tired of it. maybe we should all become queers and relax. not belting Jack. he's good for a change. there are too many people afraid to speak against queers — intellectually. just as there are too many people afraid to speak against the left wing — intellectually. I don't care which way it goes — I only know: there are too many people afraid.

so Jack's good meat. I've seen too many intellectuals lately. I get very tired of the precious intellects who must speak diamonds every time they open their mouths. I get tired of battling for each space of air for the mind. that's why I stayed away from people for so long, and now that I am meeting people, I find that I must return to my cave. there are other things beside the mind: there are insects and palm trees and pepper shakers, and I'll have a pepper-shaker in my cave, so laugh.

the people will always betray you.

never trust the people.

"the whole poetry game is run by the fags and the left-wing," he tells me, staring into the canal.

there is a kind of truth here that it is bitter and false to dispute and I don't know what to do with it. I am certainly aware that there is something wrong with the poetry game — the books of the famous are so very dull, including Shakespeare. was it the same *then?*

I decide to throw Jack some shit.

"remember the old *poetry* mag? I don't know if it was Monroe or Shapiro or what, now it's gotten so bad I don't read it anymore, but I remember a statement by Whitman: " 'to have great poets we need great audiences.' well, I always figure a Whitman a greater poet than I, if that matters, only this time I think he got the thing backwards. it should read: " 'to have great audiences we need great poets.' "

"yeah, so, all right," Jack said, "I met Creeley at a party this time and I asked him if he ever read Bukowski and he got frozen real solid, wouldn't answer me, man, like you know what I mean."

"let's get the fuck outa here," I say.

we go out toward my car. I've got a car, somehow. a lemon, of course. Jack's got the book with him. he's still turning pages.

"this guy sucks dick."

"oh yeah?"

"this guy married a schoolteacher who belts his ass with a whip. horrible woman. he ain't writ a word since his marriage. she's got his soul in her cunt-strap."

"you talking about Gregory or Kero?"

"no, this is *another* one!"

"holy Jesus!"

we keep walking toward my car. I feel rather dull but I can FEEL this man's energy, ENERGY, and I realize that it might be possible that I am walking next to one of the few immortal and unschooled poets of our time. and then, that doesn't matter either, after I think about it a moment.

I get on in. the lemon starts but the gearshift is fucked-up again. I've got to drive in low all the way and the bitch stalls at every signal, battery down, I pray, one more start, no cops, no more drunk-driving raps, no more christs of any kinds on anybody's kind of Cross, we can choose between Nixon and Humphrey and Christ and be fucked anyway we turn, and I turn left, brake up at the address and we get out.

Jack's still at the pages.

"this guy's o.k. he killed himself, his father, his mother, wife, but didn't shoot his three children or the dog. one of the best poets since Baudelaire."

"yeah?"

"yeah, shit."

we get out of the lemon as I make the sign of the Cross for one more start on the mother battery.

we walk up and Jack bangs a door.

"BIRD! BIRD! this is Jack!"

the door opens and there is the Bird. I look twice. I can't see whether it is a woman or a man. the face is the distilled essence opium of untouched beauty. it's a man. the motions are man. I know it but I also know that he can catch hell and ultimate brutality every time he hits the streets. they will kill him because he has not died at all. I have died nine-tenths but keep the other one-tenth like a gun. I can walk down the street and they can't tell me from the news vendor, even tho the news vendors have more beautiful faces than any president of the united states, but then, that's no task either.

"Bird, I need 20," says Jack.

Bird peels off a g.d. twenty. his movement is smooth, without worry.

"thanks, baby."

"sure, can you come on in?"

"all right."

we move in. sit down, there's the bookcase. I lay my eyes across it. there doesn't seem to be a dull book in there. I catch all the books I've admired in there. what the hell? is it a dream? the kid's face is so beautiful that everytime I look I feel good, like you know, chili and beans, hot, after coming off a bad one, the first food in weeks, well, fuck, I am always on guard.

the Bird. and the ocean down there. and bad battery. a lemon. the cops patrolling their stupid dry streets. what a bad war it is. and what an idiot nightmare, only this momentary cool space between us, we are all going to be smashed, very quickly into broken children's toys, into those highheels that ran so gaily down the stairway to be fucked out of it forever, forever, dunces and fools, dunces and tools, god damn our weak bravery.

we sit down. a quart of scotch appears. I pour a quarter of a pint down without pause, ah, I gag, blink, idiot, working toward 50, still trying to play Hero. asshole hero in a fusillade of puke.

the Bird's wife comes in. we are introduced. she is a liquid woman in a brown dress, she just flows flows her eyes laughing, she flows, I tell you, she flows, "WOW WOW WOW!" I say.

she looks so good I've got to pick her up, hug her, I carry her on my left hip, spin her, laugh. nobody thinks that I am crazy. we all laugh. we all understand. I put her down. we sit down.

Jack likes me coming on. he's been carrying my soul and he's tired. he grins the grin. he's o.k. once in a rare lifetime have you ever been in a roomful of people who only helped you when you looked at them, listened to them. this was one of those magic times. I knew it. I glowed like a fucking hot tamale. it didn't matter. o.k.

I smacked down another quarter pint out of embarrassment. I realized that I was the weaker of 4 people and I did not want to harm, I only wanted to realize their easy holiness. I loved like a crazy jackoff dog turned into a pen of heated female bitches, only they had miracles to show me beyond sperm.

the Bird looked at me.

"see my collage?"

he held up a very shitty-looking thing with a woman's earring and some other dab of shit hanging upon it.

(by the way … I realize I switch from present to past tense, and if you don't like it … ram a nipple up your scrotum. — printer:

leave this in.) I go into a long boring hartang harrangue about how I don’t like this or that, and about my sufferance in Art Classes …

the Bird pulls the stop out of me.

by yanking the thing apart it’s only a popneedle and then he grins at me, but then I too know the inside: that perhaps, as I am told, from inside, the only junky who can make it is Wm. Burroughs, who owns the Burroughs Co., almost, and who can play it tough while all along being a sissy fat wart-sucking hog inside. this is what I hear, and it’s kept very quiet. is it true? for it all, true or not, Burroughs is a very dull writer and without the insistence of knowledgeable pop in his literary background, he would be almost nothing, as Faulkner is nothing except to very dry Southern extremists like Mr. Corrington, and Mr. Nod, and Mr. Suck-Dry-Shit.

“Baby,” they start saying to me, “you are drunk.”

and I am. and I am. and I am.

there’s nothing now but be turned into the heat or sleep.

they make a place for me.

I drink too fast. they talk on. I hear them, gently.

I sleep. I sleep in comradeship. the sea will not drown me and neither will they. they love my sleeping body. I am an asshole. they love my sleeping body. may all God’s children come to this.

jesus jesus jesus

who cares about a dead
battery?

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jesus, mother, it was terrible — here they came pounding out of the vast cuntholes in the earth spinning me about with my paper suitcase up near Times Square.

I finally managed to ask one of them where the Village was and when I got to the Village I found a room and when I opened my wine bottle and took off my shoes I found that the room had an easel, but I wasn't a painter, just a kid looking for luck, and I sat behind the easel and drank my wine and looked out the dirty window.

when I went out to get another bottle of wine I saw this young guy standing in a silk bathrobe. he wore a beret and sandals, had a half-diseased beard and spoke into the hall phone: "oh, yes yes, darling, I *must see* you, oh yes, I *must!* I shall slash my wrists otherwise … ! yes!"

I've got to get out of here, I thought. he wouldn't slash his shoelaces. what a sickening little snip. and outside, they sat in the cafes, very comfortable, in berets, in the get-up, pretending to be Artists.

I stayed there a week drinking, finishing out the rent, and then I found a room outside the Village. for the looks and size of the room it was very cheap and I couldn't understand why. I found a bar around the corner and sipped at beers all day. my money was going but, as usual, I hated to look for a job. each drunken and starvation moment contained some type of easy meaning for me. that night I bought two bottles of port wine and went up to my room. I took off my clothes, got into bed in the dark, found a glass and poured the first wine. then I found why the room was so cheap. the "L" ran right past my window. and that's where the stop was. right outside my window. the whole room would be lit by the train. and I'd look at a whole trainload of faces. horrible faces: whores, orangutans, bastards, madmen, killers — all my masters. then, swiftly the train would start up and the room would be dark again — until the next trainload of faces, which was always too soon. I needed the wine.

a Jewish couple owned the building and also ran a tailor and cleaning shop across the street. I decided that my few rags needed cleaning. job-hunting time was belching and farting across my mad horizon. I went in drunk with my rags.

"… need these cleaned or washed or something …"

"poor boy! why you are living in THREADS! I couldn't wash the windows with this stuff. tell you what … oh, Sam!"

"yeh?"

"show this nice boy that suit the man left!"

"oh yes, it's such a *nice* suit, mama! I don't *understand* how that man left it!"

I won't go through all the dialogue. mainly I insisted that the suit was too small. they said it wasn't. I said if it wasn't too small it was too high. they said seven. I said, broke. they said six. I said, I'm broke. when they got down to four I insisted that they get me inside the suit. they did. I gave them the four. went back to my room, took the suit off and slept. when I awakened it was dark (except when the "L" came by) and I decided to put on my new suit and go out and find a woman, a beautiful one, of course, to support a man of my still-hidden talents.

as I got into the pants the entire crotch split up the back. well, I was game. it was a little cool but I figured the coat would cover. when I got into the coat the left arm ripped out at the shoulder spilling out a sickening gummy padding.

taken again.

I got out of what remained of the suit and decided that I'd have to move again.

I found another place. a rather cellar-like structure, down the steps and in between the tenants' garbage cans. I was finding my level.

the first night out after the bars closed I found I had lost my key. I only had on a thin white Calif. shirt. I rode a bus back and forth to keep from freezing. finally the driver said it was the end of the line or the ride was over. I was too drunk to remember.

when I got out it was still freezing and I was standing outside of Yankee Stadium.

oh Lord, I thought, here is where my childhood hero Lou Gehrig used to play and now I am going to die out here. well, it's fitting.

I walked about a bit, then found a cafe. I walked in. the waitresses were all middle-aged negresses but the coffee cups were large and the doughnut and coffee hardly cost anything.

I took my stuff over to a table, sat down, ate the doughnut very quickly, sipped at the coffee, then took out a king-sized cigarette and lit it.

I started hearing voices:

"PRAISE THE LORD, BROTHER!"

"OH, PRAISE THE LORD, BROTHER!"

I looked around. all the waitresses were praising me and some of the customers too. it was very nice. recognition at last. the *Atlantic* and *Harper's* be damned. genius would always out. I smiled at them all and took a big drag.

then one of the waitresses screamed at me:

"NO SMOKING IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD, BROTHER!"

I put the cigarette out. I finished the coffee. then I went outside and looked at the lettering on the window: FATHER DIVINE'S MISSION.

I lit another cigarette and began the long walk back to my place. when I got there nobody would answer the bell. I finally stretched out on top of the garbage cans and went to sleep. I knew that down on the pavement the rats would get me. I was a clever young man.

I was so clever that I even got a job the next day. and the next night, hungover, shaky, very sad, I was at work.

two old guys were to break me in. they'd each been on the job since the subways were invented. we walked along with these heavy sheets of cardboard under the left arm and a little tool in the right hand that looked like a beercan opener.

"all the people in New York have these little green-colored bugs all over them," one of the old guys said.

"izzat so?" I said, not giving the least damn what color the bugs were.

"you'll see 'em on the seats. we find 'em on the seats each night."

"yeh," said the other old man.

we walked along.

good god, I thought, did this ever happen to Cervantes?

"now watch," said one of the old guys. "each card has a little number. we replace each card with the little number with another card with the same number."

flip, flip. he beercan-opened the strips, flipped in the new advertisement, replaced the strips, took the old advertisement and put it on the bottom of the pile of cards under his left arm.

"now you try it."

I tried it. the little strips didn't want to give. I had a bum can opener. and was sick and shaky.

"you'll get it," said an old guy.

I AM getting it, you fuck, I thought.

we moved along.

then we stepped out of the rear of the car and they went ahead stepping along the railroad ties between the tracks. the space between each board was about three feet. a body could easily fall through without even trying. and we were elevated about 90 feet from the street. and it must have been 90 feet to the new car. the two old guys skipped over the boards with their heavy cardboard load and waited for me at the new car. there was a train stopped across the way picking up passengers. it was well-lit around there, but that was all. the lights from the train clearly showed me the three foot gap between the boards.

"COME ON! COME ON! WE'RE IN A HURRY!"

"god damn you and your hurry!" I screamed at the two old guys. then I stepped out on the boards with my load of cardboard under my left arm and the beercan opener in my right hand. one step, two steps, three steps … hungover, sick.

then the train that was loading pulled out. it was dark as a closet. darker than a closet. I couldn't see. I couldn't take the next step. and I couldn't turn around. I just stood there.

"come on! come on! we got a lot more cars to do!"

finally my eyes refocused a bit. I began the wobbly steps again. some of the boards were soft, were worn round and splintered. I ceased to hear their shouting. I took the transfixed strides one after the other, expecting each next step to be the one that sent me on down through.

I made the other car and threw the cardboard ads and the can opener on the floor.

"watza matta?"

"watza matta? watza matta? I say, 'FUCK IT!' "

"what's wrong?"

"one misstep and a man can get killed. don't you idiots realize that?"

"nobody's gotten killed yet."

"nobody drinks like I do, either. now, come on, tell me, how do I get the hell out of here?"

"well, there's a stairway down to the right but you've got to walk across the tracks instead of along them and that means stepping over two or three third rails."

"fuck it. what's a third rail?"

"that's the power. you touch one and you're gone."

"show me the way."

the old boys pointed to the stairway down. it didn't seem too far away.

"thank you, gentlemen."

"watch the third rail. it's gold. don't touch it or you'll burn."

I stepped on out. I could sense them watching me. each time I reached a third rail I stepped high and fancy. they had a soft and calm look to them in the moonlight.

I reached the stairway and was alive again. at the bottom of the stairway there was a bar. I heard people laughing. I went into the bar and sat down. some guy was telling stories about how his mother took care of him, made him take piano and painting lessons and how he managed to get money out of her, one way or the other, to get drunk on. the whole bar was laughing. I began laughing too. the guy was a genius, giving it away for nothing. I laughed until the bar closed and we broke up, each going our different ways.

I left New York soon after, never went back, never will. cities are built to kill people, and there are lucky towns and the other kind. mostly the other kind. in New York you've got to have all the luck. I knew I didn't have that kind. next thing I knew I was sitting in a nice room in east Kansas City listening to the manager beat up the maid because she'd failed to sell me a piece of her ass. it was real and peaceful and sane again. I listened to the screams while sitting up in bed, reached for my glass, had a good one, then stretched out among the clean sheets. the guy could really lay it on. I could hear her head bouncing against the wall.

maybe the next day when I wasn't so tired from the bus trip I'd let her have a little. she had a nice ass. at least he wasn't beating on that. and I was out of New York, almost alive.

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those were the nights, the old days at the Olympic. they had a bald little Irishman making the announcements (was his name Dan Tobey?), and he had *style*, he'd seen things happen, maybe even on the riverboats when he was a kid, and if he wasn't *that* old, maybe Dempsey-Firpo anyhow. I can still see him reaching up for that cord and pulling the mike down slowly, and most of us were drunk before the first fight, but we were easy drunk, smoking cigars, feeling the light of life, waiting for them to put two boys in there, cruel but that was the way it worked, that is what they did to us and we were still alive, and, yes, most of us with a dyed redhead or blonde, even me. her name was Jane and we had many a good ten-rounder between us, one of them ending in a k.o. of me. and I was proud when she'd come back from the lady's room and the whole gallery would begin to pound and whistle and howl as she wiggled that big magic marvelous ass in that tight skirt — and it *was* a magic ass: she could lay a man stone cold and gasping, screaming love-words to a cement sky. then she'd come down and sit beside me and I'd lift that pint like a coronet, pass it to her, she'd take her nip, hand it back, and I'd say about the boys in the gallery: "those screaming jackoff bastards, I'll kill them."

and she'd look at her program and say, "who do you want in the first?"

I picked them good — about 90 percent — but I had to see them first. I always chose the guy who moved around the least, who looked like he didn't want to fight, and if one guy gave the Sign of the Cross before the bell and the other guy didn't you had a winner — you took the guy who didn't, but it usually worked together: the guy who did all the shadow boxing and dancing around usually was the one who gave the Sign of the Cross and got his ass whipped.

there weren't many bad fights in those days and if there were it was the same as now — mostly between the heavyweights. but we let them know about it in those days — we tore the ring down or set the place on fire, busted up the seats. they just couldn't afford to give us too many bad ones. the Hollywood Legion ran the bad ones and we stayed away from the Legion. even the Hollywood boys knew the action was at the Olympic. Raft came, and the others, and all the starlets, hugging those front row seats. the gallery boys went ape and the fighters fought like fighters and the place was blue with cigar smoke, and how we screamed, baby baby, and threw money and drank our whiskey, and when it was over, there was the drive in, the old lovebed with our dyed and vicious women. you slammed it home, then slept like a drunk angel. who needed the public library? who needed Ezra? T.S. E.E.? D.H. H.D.? any of the Eliots? any of the Sitwells?

I'll never forget the first night I saw young Enrique Balanos. at the time, I had me a good colored boy. he used to bring a little white lamb into the ring with him before the fight and hug it, and that's corny but he was tough and good and a tough and good man is allowed certain leeways, right?

anyway, he was my hero, and his name might have been something like Watson Jones. Watson had good class and the flair — swift, quick quick quick, and the PUNCH, and he *enjoyed* his work. but then, one night, unannounced, somebody slipped this young Balanos in against him, and Balanos had it, took his time, slowly worked Watson down and took him over, busted him up good near the end. my hero. I couldn't believe it. if I remember, Watson was kayoed which made it a very bitter night, indeed. me with my pint screaming for mercy, screaming for a victory that simply would *not* happen. Balanos certainly had it — the fucker had a couple of snakes for arms, and he didn't *move* — he slid, slipped, jerked like some type of evil spider, always getting there, doing the thing. I knew that night that it would take a very excellent man to beat him and that Watson might as well take his little lamb and go home.

it wasn't until much later that night, the whiskey pouring into me like the sea, fighting with my woman, cursing her sitting there showing me all that fine leg, that I admitted that the better man had won.

"Balanos. good legs. he doesn't think. just reacts. better not to think. tonight the body beat the soul. it usually does. goodbye Watson, goodbye Central Avenue, it's all over."

I smashed my glass against the wall and went over and grabbed me some woman. I was wounded. she was beautiful. we went to bed. I remember a light rain came through the window. we let it rain on us. it was good. it was so good we made love twice and when we went to sleep we slept with our faces toward the window and it rained all over us and in the morning the sheets were all wet and we both got up sneezing and laughing, "jesus christ! jesus christ!" it was funny and poor Watson laying somewhere, his face slugged and pulpy, facing the Eternal Truth, facing the six rounders, the four rounders, then back to the factory with me, murdering eight or ten hours a day for pennies, getting nowhere, waiting on Papa Death, getting your mind kicked to hell and your spirit kicked to hell, we sneezed, "jesus christ!" it was funny and she said, "you're blue all over, you've turned all BLUE! jesus, look at yourself in the mirror!" and I was freezing and dying and I stood in front of the mirror and I was all BLUE! ridiculous! a skull and shit of bones! I began to laugh, I laughed so hard I fell down on the rug and she fell down on top of me and we both laughed laughed laughed, jesus christ we laughed until I thought we were crazy, and then I had to get up, get dressed, comb my hair, brush my teeth, too sick to eat, heaved when I brushed my teeth, I went outside and walked toward the overhead lighting factory, just the sun feeling good but you had to take what you could get.

Santa Anita, March 22, 1968, 3:10 p.m. I can't catch Quillo's Babe the even-money shot with Alpen Dance. the 4th race is over and I haven't touched a thing, I am $40.00 down, I should have had Boxer Bob in the 2nd with Bianco, one of the best unknown riders at the track at 9/5; any other jock, say Lambert or Pineda or Gonzales, the horse would have gone at 6/5 or even-money. but I've got an old saying (I make up old sayings as I walk around in rags) that knowledge without follow-through is worse than no knowledge at all. because if you're guessing and it doesn't work you can just say, shit, the gods are against me. but if you *know* and don't do, you've got attics and dark halls in your mind to walk up and down in and wonder about. this ain't healthy, leads to unpleasant evenings, too much to drink and the shredding machine.

all right. old horseplayers don't just fade away. they die. hard and finally, on east 5th or selling papers out front with a sailor's cap on, pretending it's all a lark, your mind split in half, your guts dangling, your cock without sweet pussy. I think that it was one of Freud's favorite pupils, who has now become a philosopher of some renown — my x-wife used to read him — who said that gambling was a form of masturbation. very nice to be a bright boy and say these things. and there is always a minor truth contained in almost every saying. if I were an easy bright boy I think I would say something like, "cleaning the fingernails with a dirty fingernail file is a form of masturbation." and I would probably win a scholarship, a grant, the king's sword on shoulder and 14 hot pieces of ass. I will only say this, out of a background of factories, park benches, two-bit jobs, bad women, bad weather of Life — the reason the average person is at the track is that they are driven screwy by the turn of the bolt, the foreman's insane face, the landlord's hand, the lover's dead sex; taxation, cancer, the blues; clothes that fall apart on a 3rd wearing, water that tastes like piss, doctors that run assembly-line and indecent offices, hospitals without heart, politicians with skulls filled with pus … we can go on and on but would only be accused of being bitter and demented, but the world makes madmen (and women) of us all, and even the saints are demented, nothing is saved. so shit. well. according to my figures I've only had 2500 pieces of ass but I've watched 12,500 horse races, and if I have any advice to anybody it's this: take up watercolor painting.

but what I am trying to tell you is, that the reason most people are at the racetrack is that they are in agony, ey yeh, and they are so desperate that they will take a chance on further agony rather than face their present position (?) in life. now the big boys are not as half-ass as we think they are. they sit on mountain tops studying the ant-swirl. don't you think Johnson is proud of his bellybutton? and don't you realize, at the same time, that Johnson is one of the biggest assholes ever fomented upon us? we are hooked, slapped and chopped silly; so silly that some of us finally love our tormentors because they are there to torment us along logical lines of torture. this seems so reasonable, since there isn't anything else showing. it's got to be right because that's all there is. what? Santa Anita is there. Johnson is there. and, one way or another we keep them there. we build our own racks and scream when our genitals are torn off by the subnormal keeper waving the big silver cross (gold is out). let this explain, then, why some of us, if not most of us, if not all of us are there, say on a day like March 22, 1968, an afternoon in Arcadia, Calif.

end of 5th race won by the 12 horse Quadrant. the board reads 5/2 and I have to win on the nose. horse won big, running past horses in the stretch and drawing out. I have ten win and am $40.00 down and wait on the official sign. a 5/2 shot pays between $7.00 and $7.80 and so ten win means a return of between $35.00 and $39.00. so I figure I am about even. the horse was three on the line and never moved from 5/2 all during the betting. the official payoff was flashed on the board: 5:40.

right on the toteboard. $five-four-oooh. which lies halfway between 8/5 and 9/5 and is not 5/2 at all. earlier in the week, in an overnight gesture, the track doubled the parking fee from 25 cents to 50 cents. I doubt that the parking lot attendants' salaries were doubled. also they snatched the whole $2.00 instead of the $1.95 on entering. now, $5.40. god damn. a slow unbelievable moan went across the grandstand and through the infield. in watching nearly 13,000 races I had never seen an occurrence like this. the board is not infallible. I have seen a 9/5 pay $6.00, and other slight variances, but never have I seen a 5/2 pay close to 8/5 nor have I ever seen a 5/2 drop in one flash (the last one) from 5/2 to close to 8/5. it would have taken an almost unbelievable amount of money bet at the last moment to do this.

the crowd began to BOOOOO BOOOOOO BOOOOO! it died, then began again. BOOO, BOOOOOO, BOOOOO! and each time it began it lasted longer. the mob smelled rotten fish plus greed. the mob had been knifed, again. $5.40 meant a return to me of $27.00 instead of a possible $39.00. and I wasn't the only one affected. you could feel the mob writhing, stung; to many out there each race meant rent or no rent, food or no food, car payment or no car payment.

I looked down at the track and there was a man out there waving his program, pointing at the board. he was evidently talking to a track steward. then the man waved his program at the crowd, waving them in, asking them to come out onto the track. one man came through, leaping the rail. the crowd cheered. another man found the gateway opening in the rail. now there were three. the crowd cheered. people were feeling better. now they came, more and more and the crowd cheered. everybody was feeling better. a chance. a chance? something of some sort. more came. there must have been between 40 and 65 people spread across the track.

the announcer came on over the speaker: “LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WE ARE ASKING YOU TO PLEASE CLEAR THE TRACK SO THAT WE MAY BEGIN THE 6th RACE!”

his voice was not kindly. there were ten track policemen down there in their Santa Anita grays. each man carried a gun. the crowd booed, BOOOOOOOED!

then one of the players down there noticed that the next race was on the turf. hell, they were blocking the dirt track. the crowd moved on over to the grass infield which circles inside the dirt track as the horses came out for the post parade. there were eight horses led by the outrider in his red hunting jacket and black cap. the crowd spread across the track.

“PLEASE,” the announcer said, “CLEAR THE TRACK! PLEASE CLEAR THE TRACK! THE TOTEBOARD WAS UNABLE TO REGISTER THE LAST FLASH DOWN IN THE BETTING. THE PRICE IS CORRECT!”

the horses moved slowly toward the waiting crowd. those horses looked very big and nervous.

I asked Denver Danny, a guy who has hung around the tracks much longer than I, “what the hell gives, Denver?”

“the board reads properly,” he said, “that’s not the bitch. each dollar bet is recorded. when the machines closed the board read 5/2; the board flashed again and there were the final variances but the 5/2 remained. now the French have an old saying, ‘who is to guard the guards themselves?’ as you recall, Quadrant was the obvious winner a 3rd of the way down the stretch, drawing out. a number of things could have happened. perhaps the machines were never locked during the running. when Quadrant was the obvious winner management could have stood there and kept punching out winning tickets. others say that one or two machines can be fixed to remain open and in use when the others are locked. I really don't know. all I know is that some SHIT went on and everybody else here knows it too."

the horses moved on toward the crowd. the outrider and the front horse, a monster, RICH DESIRE, br. g.4, Pierce up, moved toward the line of waiting people. one of the boys called the track police something very filthy and three of the cops took him over to the rail and roughed him up a bit. the crowd got on them and they let him go and ran back to their positions in front of the line of people spread across the track. the horses kept moving forward, and you could see that they intended to go through. the orders were in. this was the moment: men on horses against men with nothing. two of three guys lay down in front of the horses, right in front of the line of march. this was it. the outrider's face distorted suddenly, it got as red as his hunting jacket, and he grabbed the number one horse, RICH DESIRE, by the rein, spurred his horse and rammed through human flesh, eyes shut. the horse got through. I'm not sure whether he broke anybody's back or not.

but the outrider had earned his salary. a good management boy. and some of the few scabs in the stands cheered. but it wasn't over. a few of the guys grabbed at the number one horse and tried to pull the jock out of the saddle and to the ground. then the police moved in. the other horses got on through but the boys momentarily had the number one horse and Pierce was almost pulled out of the saddle. this was the final sway of the tide.

I'm sure that if they could have gotten Pierce out of the saddle they would have ended up burning the grandstands and smashing up the whole damn dumb scene. meanwhile the cops were working over the boys pretty good. no guns were pulled but it looked like the cops were enjoying the action, especially one cop who kept hitting an old man along the top of the head, back of the neck and along the spine. Pierce got on through with RICH DESIRE, an aptly named gelding, and the horse warmed up for their mile and one half on the turf. the cops seemed particularly vicious and energetic and the protesters didn't seem too interested in fighting back. the game was lost. so the track was cleared.

the next voice that went up was: "DON'T BET! DON'T BET! DON'T BET!"

what a thing that would have been, eh? not a dollar for the vultures — fat subnormal slobs thrown out of Beverly Hills homes. all too good. there was already six grand in the mutuels when they started to holler, "DON'T BET!" we were hooked, bleeding, gotten forever … there was nothing we could do but bet again and again and again and take it.

ten cops stood along the infield rail. proud and true and sweating, they'd earned a hard day's pay. the winner of the 6th was OFF, who read nine to one and paid that. if the board has paid eight or seven there would be no Santa Anita today.

I read that the next day, Saturday, there were around 45,000 people at the track, which was about normal.

I was not there and I was not missed and the horses ran and I wrote this.

March 23, 8 p.m., Los Angeles the same damn sadness and no place to go.

maybe next time we'll get that number one horse.

it takes practice, a little laughter and some luck.

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this guy in the army fatigues came up to me and said, "now that it happened to Kennedy you'll have something to write about." he claims to be a writer, why doesn't *he* write about it? I've always got to pick up their messy balls and put them into a little literary sack for them. I think we've got enough experts on the case now — that's what this decade is: the Decade of the Experts and the Decade of the Assassins. and neither one of them worth crystallized dog turds. the main problem with a thing like that last assassination is that we not only lose a man of some worth but we also lose political, spiritual and social gains, and there *are* such things, even if they do seem high-sounding. what I mean is, that in an assassination crisis the anti-human and reactionary forces tend to solidify their prejudices and to use all ruptures as a means of knocking natural Freedom off the goddamned end seat at the bar.

I don’t want to get as holy about being *active* and involved with mankind as Camus did (see his essays) because basically most of mankind sickens me and the only saving that *can* be done is a whole new concept of Universal Education-Vibration understanding of happiness, reality and flow, and that’s for the little children who ain’t murdered yet, but they will be, I’ll lay you twenty-five to one, for no new concept will be allowed — it would be too destructive to the power gang. no, I’m no Camus, but, sweetheart, it bothers me to see the Klankheads making hay out of Tragedy.

Gov. Reagan’s statement, in part: “The average man, decent, law-abiding, God-fearing, is as disturbed and worried as you and I about what happened.

“He, and all of us, are the victims of an attitude that has been growing in our land for nearly a decade — an attitude that says a man can choose the laws he must obey, that he can take the law into his own hands for a cause, that crime does not necessarily mean punishment.

“This attitude has been spurred by demagogic and irresponsible words of so-called leaders in and out of office.”

but, God, I can’t go on. it’s so dreary. the Father-Image with ye old razor strop to whip our ass. now the good governor is going to take away our toys and put us to bed without dinner.

lord lord, *I* didn’t murder Kennedy, either one of them. or King. or Malcom X. or the rest. but it’s fairly obvious to me that the Left Wing Liberal forces are being picked off one by one — *whatever* the reason (a suspect who once worked in a health food store and hated Jews) — *whatever* the reason, the left-wingers are being murdered and put into their graves while the right-wingers don’t even get grass-stains upon their pantscuffs. and weren’t Roosevelt and Truman also shot at? Democrats. how very odd.

that the assassins are sick, I will admit, and that the Father-Image is also sick, I will also admit. I'm also told by the God-fearing that I have "sinned" because I was born a human being and once upon a time human beings did something to one Jesus Christ. I neither killed Christ or Kennedy and neither did Gov. Reagan. that makes us even, not him *one* up. I see no reason to lose any judicial or spiritual freedoms, small as these may be now. who is bullshitting who? if a man dies in bed while fucking, must the rest of us stop copulating? if one non-citizen is a madman must all citizens be treated as madmen? if somebody killed God, did I want to kill God? if somebody wanted to kill Kennedy did I want to kill Kennedy? what makes the governor, *himself*, so right and the rest of us so wrong? speech-writers, and not very good ones at that.

a very curious aside: I had no reason to drive throughout town June 6th and 7th and in the Negro districts nine out of ten cars had their headlights burning in daylight in tribute to Kennedy; driving North the ratio lessened until along Hollywood Blvd. and along Sunset between La Brea and Normandie it became one in ten. Kennedy was a white man, babies. I am white. as I drove my headlights did not burn. nevertheless, while driving between Exposition and Century, I got some cool and wonderful chills that made me feel better.

but like I say, everybody including the governor has a mouth and almost everybody let go, ingraining their prejudices, making personal hay outa tragedy. those who *got* wanta keep and they are going to tell you how wrong *everything* is that might strip them of their golden drawers. I am apolitical but with these murky curve-balls these reactionaries throw, I might get pissed and into the game yet.

even the sportswriters got into the game, and as anybody knows the sportswriters are the worst of the worst when it comes to writing and especially when it comes to thinking. I don't know which is worse, their writing or their thinking, but whichever is on top it is a union which will only bear illegitimate and unendearing monsters. as you must realize, the worst form of humor takes its dreary tool in extreme exaggeration. so does the worst form of ego-patronizing and emotional-patronizing type of thinking.

one sportswriter on our largest non-striking newspaper came on like this, in part (while R. Kennedy was in surgery): “The Violent State of America: A Nation in Surgery”

“… once again America the Beautiful has taken a bullet to the groin. The country is in surgery. The Violent States of America. One bullet is mightier than one million votes …

“It’s not a Democracy, it’s a Lunacy. A country that shrinks from punishing its criminals, disciplining its children, locking up its mad …

“the President of the United States is chosen in a hardware store, a mail order catalogue …

“Freedom is being gunned down. The ‘right’ to murder is the ultimate right in this country. Sloth is a virtue. Patriotism is a sin. Conservation is an anachronism. God is over thirty years old. To be young is the only religion — as if it were a hardwon virtue. ‘Decency’ is dirty feet, a scorn for work. ‘Love’ is something you need penicillin for. ‘Love’ is handing a flower to a naked young man with vermin in his hair while your mother sits home with a broken heart. You ‘love’ strangers, not parents.

“I like people with curtains on the window, not people with ‘pads.’ The next guy that calls money ‘bread’ should be paid off in whole wheat. I am sick of being told I should try to ‘understand’ evil. Should a canary ‘understand’ a cat?

“The Constitution was never conceived as a shield for degeneracy. You start out burning the flag and you end up burning Detroit. You do away with the death penalty for everyone but Presidential candidates — and presidents …

“… Men of God become men of the Mob. The National Anthem is a scream in the night. Americans can’t walk in their own parks, get on their own buses. They have to cage themselves.

“ ‘Get off your knees, America!’ people cry, but it is ignored. Bare your teeth, they say. Threaten to fight back. The lion bares his teeth and the jackals slink away. A cowering animal invites attack. But America is not listening.

"… neurotic students with their feet on desks they couldn't make, pulling down universities they wouldn't know how to rebuild.

"…it all begins with that, the deification of drifters, wastrels, poltroons — insolent guests at the gracious table of democracy overturning it on their dismayed hosts…

"… Pray God our healers can repair Bobby Kennedy. Who is going to repair America?"

do you want this guy? I thought so. too easy. pre-graduate purple prose colored only from a survival viewpoint of present position. do you drive a garbage truck? don't feel bad. there are better jobs, done worse.

lock up the mad. but who *is* mad? we all play our little game, depending upon the positions of the pawns, the knights, the castles, the king, the queen, ah, what the hell, I'm beginning to sound like *him*.

and now we will have the headshrinkers, the thinkers, the panels, the appointed presidential boards trying to figure out what's wrong with us. who's mad, who's glad, who's sad, who's right, who's wrong. lock up the mad, when fifty-nine out of sixty men you meet on the street are cuckoo with industrial neuroses and wives and strives and no time to loosen up and find out where they are or why, and when money which has kept them boosted and blinded for so fucking long, when that's no good no longer, then what we gonna *do?* come, baby, the assassins have been with us for a long time. only it ain't been a blast, just a man with a face like sawdust and eyes like shitstains, so many men like that and women too. millions of them.

and soon we will have the reports from the headshrinker panels, which like the poverty panels which told us that some men are starving downstairs, they will tell us that some men are starving upstairs; and then everything will be forgotten until the next little emotional little murder or city burning, and then they will assemble again and utter their dull little expected words, rub their hands and disappear like turds down a flushing pot. it really seems that they don’t care so long as the balance board is maintained. and those little headshrinkers, flashing their magic aces, conning us with words, saying this is so because your mother had a clubfoot and your father drank and a chicken shitted in your mouth when you were three years old and therefore you are a homosexual or a punchpress operator. everything but the truth: simply that some men feel bad because life is bad for them the way it is and that it could easily be made better. but, no, the headshrinkers with their mechanistic baubles that will some day be proven completely false, they will continue to tell us that we are all mad and they will be well-paid to do so. we’re just not taking it right. remember some of the songs?: “lucky lucky me

I can live in luxury
because I’ve got a pocketful of
dreams …”
“it’s my universe

even with an empty purse
because I’ve got a pocketful of
dreams …”
or:
“no more money in the bank
no more people we can thank

what to do about it
oh, what to do about it:
let's turn out the lights and
go to sleep."

what they *won't* tell us is that our madmen, our assassins *do* spring from our present mode of life, our good old All-American way of living and dying. Christ, that we are all not *outwardly* raving, that's the miracle! and since we have been rather sombre here, let's end it on the light fantastic, speaking, as we are, about madness. I was down in Santa Fe one time speaking to, no, rather drinking with, a friend of mine who was a headshrinker of some renown, and in the middle of one of our drunks I leaned forward and asked him, — "Jean, tell me, am I crazy? come on, babe, let me have it. I can take it."

he finished his drink, put it on the coffee table and told me, "you'll have to pay me my fee first."

then I knew that at least one of us was crazy. Gov. Reagan and the Los Angeles sports writers were not there. and the second Kennedy had not yet been assassinated. but I got the odd feeling, sitting in that room with him that things were not well, not well at all, and would not be, would not be for another couple of thousand years at least.

and, so now, my friend in the army fatigues, you write yours …

"it's over," he said, "the dead have won."

"the dead have won, have won, have won," said Moss.

"who won the ballgame?" Anderson asked Moss.

"I dunno."

Moss walked to the window. he saw a male American walking by. he shouted out the window — "hey, who won the ballgame?"

"Pirates, 3 to 2," answered the male American.

"you heard it, didn't you?" asked Moss of Anderson.

"yeh. Pirates, 3-2."

"I wonder who won the ninth race?"

"I know that one," said Moss. "Spaceman II. 7 to 1."

"who rode?"

"Garza."

they sat down to their beer. they were not quite drunk.

"the dead have won," said Anderson.

"tell me something new," said Moss.

"well, I've got to get some pussy pretty soon or I'll go goofy."

"the price is always too high. forget it."

"I know. but I can't forget it. I'm starting to have crazy dreams. I screw chickens in the ass."

"chickens? does it work?"

"in the dream it works."

they sucked at their beer. they were two old friends in their mid-thirties with dull jobs. Anderson had been married once, divorced once. two children somewhere. Moss married twice, divorced twice. one child somewhere. it was Saturday evening at Moss' apartment.

Anderson tossed an empty beer bottle through the air in a great arc. it landed on top of the others in the large wastebasket. "you know," he said, "some men just aren't any good with women. I never was any good with women. the whole thing seems a terrible bore, and when it's over you feel like you really been screwed."

"you tryin' to be funny?"

"you know what I mean: gyped, short-changed. the panties on the floor there with just the slightest of a summer shit-stain on them and her plodding to the bathroom, victorious. you lay there looking at the ceiling with your limp meat and wonder what the hell it means, knowing you've got to listen to her empty-headed chatter the rest of the evening … and I've got a daughter too. umm, listen, do you think I'm Victorian or queer or something?"

"naw, man. I know what you mean. you know, reminds me, one time at this gal's place, I knew her only slightly, a friend had more or less sent me over. I showed up with a pint and slipped her a ten. it wasn't bad and I figured no spiritual intimacy, no soul-stuff. I rolled off feeling fairly free, stared at the ceiling, stretched, and waited for her to make her bathroom run. she reached under the springs and pulled out this rag and handed it to me to wipe off with. it took the heart out of me. the damn rag was almost stiff all over. but I played the pro. I found a soft spot and wiped off. it took some searching to find the soft spot. then *she* used the rag. I got out of there fast. and if you want to call that Victorian, go ahead, call it Victorian."

they were both quiet a while, drinking the beer.

"but let's not be pricks," said Moss.

"uhhh?" asked Anderson.

"there *are* some good women."

"uuhh?"

"yeah, I mean when everything works well. I had a girl friend once, jesus, it was pure heaven. and no demands on soul or anything like that."

"what happened?"

"she died young."

"tough."

"tough, yes. I damn near drank myself to death."

they worked at their beer.

"how come?" asked Anderson.

"how come what?"

"how come we agree on almost everything?"

"that's why we're friends, I guess. that's what friendship means: sharing the prejudice of experience."

"Moss and Anderson. a team. we should be on Broadway."

"the seats would be empty."

"yeah."

(silence, silence, silence) then:

"beer keeps getting flatter and flatter. they sure make it lousy anymore."

"yeah. Garza. I could never hit with Garza."

"his percentage ain't high."

"but now that Gonzales lost his bug maybe he'll get better mounts."

“Gonzales. he ain’t big and strong enough. his horses always drift out on the turns.”

“he makes more money than we do.”

“that’s no miracle.”

“no.”

Moss tossed his beer bottle toward the basket, missed.

“I was never an athlete,” he said. “god, in school they always chose me next to last when they chose teams. right before the subnormal idiot. Winchell was his name.”

“whatever happened to Winchell?”

“now president of a steel company.”

“god.”

“want to hear the rest?”

“why not?”

“the hero. Harry Jenkins. now at San Quentin.”

“god. are the right men in jail or the wrong men in jail?”

“both: the right and the wrong.”

“you’ve been in jail. what’s it like?”

“it’s the same.”

“what do you mean?”

“I mean, it’s a society of the world in another element. they grade themselves according to their trade. the swindlers don’t hobnob with the car thieves. the car thieves don’t hobnob with the rapists. the rapists don’t hobnob with the indecent exposure cases. all men are graded according to what they got caught at doing. for instance, a maker of dirty films is graded fairly high while a man who molested a child is graded damn low.”

“how do you grade them?”

“all the same: caught.”

“all right, then. what’s the difference between a guy in the bighouse and the average guy you pass on the street?”

“the guy in the bighouse is a Loser who has *tried*.”

“you win. I still need some pussy.”

Moss went to the refrigerator and brought out some more beer. sat down and cracked two open.

"ah, pussy," he said. "we talk like kids of fifteen. I just can't get *at* it anymore, I just can't jump through all the boring loopholes, do the litthe niceties. some men just have the natural touch. I think of Jimmy Davenport. christ what a vain terrible little shit he was, but the ladies just loved him. a horrible monster of a person. after he finished screwing them he used to go to their refrigerators and piss onto the open bowls of salad and into the cartons of milk, anywhere he could. he thought it was very funny. then she'd come out and sit down, her eyes just mushrooming with love for the bastard. he took me around to his girl friend's places to show me how he did it, and even lined me up a bit now and then, so that's why I was there and saw it. but it seems that the most beautiful women always go for the most horrible shits, the most obvious fakes. or am I just jealous, is my vision distorted?"

"you're right, man. the woman loves the fake because he lies so well."

"well, then, presuming this is true — that the female procreates with the fake — then doesn't this destroy a law of Nature? — that the strong mate with the strong? what kind of a society does this give us?"

"society's laws and nature's laws are different. we have an *un*natural society. that's why we are near to being blown to Hell. intuitively the female knows that the fake survives in our society and that is why she prefers him. she is only interested in bearing the child and bringing him through safely."

"then you say the female has brought us to the edge of hell where we sit today?"

"the word for that is 'misogynist.' "

"and Jimmy Davenport is King."

"King of the Pissers. the pussy has betrayed us and their atomic eggs lay stacked all about us …"

"call it 'misogyny.' "

Moss lifted his beer bottle:

"to Jimmy Davenport!"

Anderson lifted his:

"to Jimmy Davenport!"

they drained their bottles.

Moss opened two more. "two lonely old men blaming it on the ladies …"

"we're really a couple of shits," said Anderson.

"yeah."

"listen, you sure you don't know a couple of pussy somewhere?"

"maybe."

"whyn't you try?"

"you're a jerk," said Moss. then he got up and went to the phone. dialed a number.

he waited.

"Shareen?" he said. "oh yeah, Shareen … Lou. Lou Moss … you remember? the party on Katella Ave. Lou Brinson's place … a hell of a night. sure, I *know* I was nasty but we made it, remember? I always liked you, it's the face, I think it's the face, so classical-like. no. just a couple of beers. how's Mary Lou? Mary Lou's a fine person. I've got this friend … what? he teaches philosophy at Harvard. no kidding. but a natural guy. I *know* Harvard's a Law School! but what the hell, they still have these Immanuel Kants running around! what? a '65 Chevvy. just made my last payment. when? do you still have that green dress with that screwy belt that hangs way down around your tail? I'm *not* being funny. very sexy. and beautiful. I keep dreaming of you and chickens. what? a joke. how about Mary Lou? o.k. fine. but tell her this guy is very deferential. brainy. bashful. all that … oh, a distant cousin. Maryland. what? oh hell, I've got a *powerful* family! oh, is that right? now *you're* being funny. anyhow, he's in town and loose. no, of *course* he isn't married! why would I lie? no, I keep thinking of you — that low-hanging belt — I know it sounds corny — class. you're top class. sure, radio and heater. the Strip? just a bunch of kids down there now. why don't I just bring a bottle? … all right, sorry. no, I'm not *saying* you're old. Christ, you know me, me and my mouth. no, I would have called but they sent me out of town. how old? he's 32 but looks younger. I think he's on some kind of grant, going to Europe soon. to teach at Heidelberg. no, no shit. what time? all right, Shareen. see you, sweets."

Moss hung up. sat down. picked up his beer.

"we've got an hour's freedom, professor."

"an hour?" asked Anderson.

"an hour. they've got to powder their pussies, all that. you know how it works."

"to Jimmy Davenport!" said the professor from Harvard.

"to Jimmy Davenport!" said the punch-press operator.

they drank them down.

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the phone rang.

he was sitting on the rug. he pulled the whole phone to the floor by the wire. then he picked up the receiver. there was a sound.

"hello?" he said.

"McCuller!"

"yowp?"

"it's been 3 days."

"since what?"

"since you've been to work."

"I'm building a Leyden Jar."

"what's that?"

"an apparatus for storing static electricity, invented by Cuneus of Leyden in 1746."

he hung the phone up and then threw it across the room. the receiver fell off. he finished his beer and went in to shit. he zipped up and walked back into the other room.

"DA DA!" he sang,

“DA DA

DA DA

DA DA DA DA!”
he liked Herb A’s T. Brass. jesus, what sour melancholy.

“RA DA

RA DA

RA DA DA DA — ”

when he sat down in the center of the rug, there was his three and one-half year old daughter. he farted.

“hey! you FARTED!” she said.

“I FARTED!” he said.

they both laughed.

“Fred,” she said.

“yowp?”

“I gotta tellya somethin’.”

“shoot.”

“mama got all this shit pulled outa her ass.”

“yes?”

“yes, these people reached up into her ass with their fingers and pulled all this shit outa there.”

“what makes you talk that way? you know that didn’t happen.”

“yes, it did, it *did!* I *saw* it!”

“go get me a beer.”

“o.k. . . .”

she ran off into the other room.

“RA DA,”

he sang,

“RA DA

RA DA

RA DA DA DA!”

his daughter came back with the beer.

“sweetheart,” he said, “I want to tell you something.”

“all right.”

“the pain is now almost *entirely* total. when it gets entirely total I will not be able to last any longer.”

“why don’t you get blue like me?” she asked.

“I’m already blue.”

“why don’t you get blue like me and the flowers?”

“I’ll try,” he said.

“let’s dance to ‘The Man of La Mancha,’ “ she said.

he put on ‘The Man of La Mancha.’ they danced, he six feet tall and she about 1/3 or 1/4 his size. they danced separately with different movements and were very serious, yet sometimes laughed at the same time.

the record stopped.

“Marty slapped me,” she said.

“what?”

“yes, Marty and mama were hugging and kissing in the kitchen and I was thirsty and asked Marty for a glass of water and Marty wouldn’t give me one and then I cried and then Marty slapped me.”

“go get me a beer!”

“a beer! beer!”

he got up and walked over and hung the phone up. as soon as he did, it rang.

“Mr. McCuller?”

“yowp?”

“your auto insurance has expired. your new rate is $248 a year and must be paid in advance. you have picked up three traffic violations. each violation is viewed by us in the same light as an auto accident …"

"horseshit!"

"what?"

"an auto accident costs you money; a so-called violation costs me money. and the boys on their bikes, who protect us from ourselves, have a sixteen to thirty a day ticket quota to meet in order to buy their homes, their new cars, and clothing and trinkets for their lower-middle class wives. don't give me all your shit. I've stopped driving. I pushed my car off the pier last night. I only have one regret."

"what's that?"

"that I wasn't inside that fucking car when it went down."

McCuller hung up and took the beer his daughter had brought him.

"little maiden," he said, "may at least some of your hours be more gentle than mine."

"I love you, Freddie," she said.

she reached around and put her arms around his body but the arms would not go entirely around.

"I squeeze you! I love you! I squeeze you!"

"I love you too, little maiden!"

he reached around her and squeezed her. she glowed and glowed and if she had been a cat she would have purred.

"man, man, it's a funny world," he said. "we've got everything but we can't have it."

they got down on the floor and played a game called "BUILD A CITY." there was some argument over where the railroad tracks were and just what and who was allowed to use the railroad tracks.

then the bell rang. he got up and opened the door. his daughter saw them: "Mama! Marty!"

"get your stuff, sweety, it's time to go!"

"I wanna stay with Freddie!"

"I said, 'Get your stuff!' "

"but I wanna stay with Freddie!"

“I’m not going to tell you again! get your stuff or I’ll paddle your behind!”

“Freddie, *you* tell them I want to stay!”

“she wants to stay.”

“you’re drunk again, Freddie. I *tole* you I don’ want you ta drink ’round the kid!”

“well, *you’re* drunk!”

“don’t call her drunk, Freddie,” said Marty, lighting a cigarette. “I don’t like you anyhow. I always thought you were about halfqueer.”

“thank you for telling me what you think I am.”

“just don’t call her drunk, Freddie or I’ll whip your ass …”

“just a moment, I have something to show you.”

Freddie walked back into the kitchen. when he came out he was singing:

“RA DA

RA DA

RA DA DA DA!”

Marty saw the butcher knife. “what do you think you’re going to do with *that* thing? I’ll jam it up your ass.”

“no doubt, but I wanted to tell you. the lady from the business office of the phone company phoned me and said that my service would be disconnected because retributions for past bills had not been made. I told her that I’d like to fuck her and she hung up.”

“so what?”

“I mean, I *too* can disconnect.”

Freddie moved very fast. the quickness was a still magic. the butcher knife sliced four or five times across Marty’s throat before he fell back, down, halfway down the steps …

“geezus … don’ kill me, please don’ kill me.”

Freddie walked back into the front room, threw the knife into the fireplace and sat on the rug again. his daughter sat down with him: “now we can finish our game.”

“sure.”

“no cars on the railroad tracks.”

“hell no. the police would arrest us.”

“and we don’t want the police to arrest us, do we?”

“uh uh.”

“Marty’s fulla blood, isn’t he?”

“sure is.”

“is that what we’re made of?”

“mostly.”

“mostly what?”

“mostly blood and bones and pain.”

they sat there and played Build a City. you could hear the sirens. one ambulance, too late. three squad cars. a white cat walked by, looked at Marty, lifted its nose, ran off. one ant crawled on the sole of his left shoe.

"Freddie."

"what?"

"I wanna tell ya somethin'."

"shoot."

"these people reached into mama's ass and pulled all that shit outa there with their fingers …"

"o.k., I believe you."

"where's mama, now?"

"I don't know."

mama was running up and down the streets telling all the newsboys and grocery clerks and bartenders and subnormals and sadists and motorcycle riders and salt-eaters and x-seamen and loafers and hustlers and readers of Matt Weinstock, and so forth and so forth, and the sky was blue and the bread was in wrappers, and for the first time in years her eyes were live and beautiful. but death was really boredom, death was really boredom, and even the tigers and ants would never know how and the peach would someday scream.

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all the rivers are going to get higher, and yet it's tight, the schoolteachers whack you with rulers and the worms eat the corn; they are mounting the mgs on tripods and the bellies are white and the bellies are black and the bellies are bellies. men are beaten simply for the sake of *beating*; courts are places where the ending is written first and all that precedes is simply vaudeville. men are taken into rooms for questioning and come out half-men or no-men at all. some men hope for revolution but when you revolt and set up your new government you find your new government is still the same old Papa, he has only put on a cardboard mask. the Chicago boys sure made a mistake busting the big press boys on the head — that knock on the head *might* get them to thinking and the big presses — aside from an earlier *New York Times* and some editions of *The Christian Science Monitor* — stopped thinking with the declaration of World War One. you can bust OPEN CITY for printing a normal portion of the human body but when you kick the editorial writer of a million circulation newspaper in the ass you better watch out, he just might start writing the truth about Chicago and everyplace else, advertisers be damned. he might only be able to write one column but that one column might get a million readers thinking — for a change — and nobody could tell what might happen then. but the lock's on tight: when you are given a choice between Nixon and Humphrey it's like being given a choice between eating warm shit or cold shit.

there just isn't much change anywhere. the thing in Prague has dampened a lot of boys who have forgotten Hungary. they hang in the parks with the Che idol, with pictures of Castro in their amulets, going OOOOOOOMMMMM OOOOOOOMMM while William Burroughs, Jean Genet and Allen Ginsberg lead them. these writers have gone, soft, cuckoo, eggshit, female — not homo but female — and if I were a cop I'd feel like clubbing their addled brains myself. hang me for that. the writer of the streets is getting his soul cock-sucked by the idiots. there is only one place to write and that is ALONE at a typewriter. a writer who has to go INTO the streets is a writer who does not know the streets. I have seen enough factories, whorehouses, jails, bars, park orators to last 100 men 100 lifetimes. to go into the streets when you have a NAME is to go the easy way — they killed Thomas and Behan with their LOVE, their whiskey, their idolatry, their cunt, and they half-murdered half a hundred others. WHEN YOU LEAVE YOUR TYPEWRITER YOU LEAVE YOUR MACHINE GUN AND THE RATS COME POURING THROUGH. when Camus began giving speeches before the academies his writing died. Camus did not begin as a speechmaker, he began as a writer; it was not an automobile accident that killed him.

when some of my few friends ask, "why don't you give poetry readings, Bukowski?" they simply do not understand why I say "no."

and so we have Chicago and so we have Prague and it's no different than it has ever been. the little boy is going to get his ass beat and when (and if) the little boy gets big he is going to beat on ass. I'd rather see Cleaver president than Nixon but that's no big thing. what these god-damned revolutionaries who lay around my place drinking my beer and eating my food and showing off their women must learn is that the thing must come from inside out. you just can't give a man a new government like a new hat and expect a different man inside that hat. he's still going to have chickenshit proclivities and a full belly and a complete set of Dizzy Gillespie ain't going to change that. a lot of people swear that there is going to be a revolution but I'd hate to see all those people get killed for nothing. I mean, you can kill most people and you aren't killing anything but a few good men are bound to go. and then what do you end up with: a government OVER the people. a new dictator in sheep's clothing; the ideology was only to keep the guns going.

the other night some kid told me (he was sitting in the center of the rug looking very spiritual and beautiful): "I'm going to shut off all the sewers. the whole city will be floating in turds!"

why, the kid had already told me enough shit to bury the whole city of L.A. and halfway up into Pasadena.

then he said, "got another beer, Bukowski?"

his whore crossed her legs high and showed me a flash of pink panty so I got up and got the kid a beer.

revolution sounds very romantic, you know. but it ain't. it's blood and guts and madness; it's little kids killed who get in the way, it's little kids who don't understand what the fuck is going on. it's your whore, your wife ripped in the belly with a bayonet and then raped in the ass while you watch. it's men torturing men who used to laugh at Mickey Mouse cartoons. before you go into the thing, decide where the spirit is and where the spirit will be when it is over. I don't go with Dos — CRIME AND PUNISHMENT — that no man has a right to take another man's life. but it might take a bit of thinking first. of course, the gall is that they have been taking our lives without firing a bullet. I too have worked for dismal wages while some fat boy has raped fourteen-year-old virgins in Beverly Hills. I've seen men fired for taking five minutes too long in the crapper. I've seen things I don't even want to talk about. but before you kill something make sure you have something better to replace it with; something better than political opportunist slamming hate horseshit in the public park. if you are going to pay through the nose get something better than a 36 month warranty. as yet, I have seen nothing but this emotional and romantic yen for Revolution; I've seen no solid leader or no realistic platform to insure AGAINST the betrayal that has always, so far, followed. if I am going to kill a man I don't want to see him replaced by a carbon copy of the same man and the same way. we have wasted history like a bunch of drunks shooting dice back in the men's crapper of the local bar. I am ashamed to be a member of the human race but I don't want to add any more to that shame, I want to scrape a little of it off.

it's one thing to talk about Revolution while your belly is full of another man's beer and you're traveling with a sixteen-year-old runaway girl from Grand Rapids; it's one thing to talk about Revolution while three jackass writers of international fame have you dancing to the OOOOOOOOOOMMM game; it's another thing to bring it about, it's another thing to have happen. Paris, 1870-71, 20,000 people murdered in the streets, the streets as red with blood as with rain, and the rats coming out and eating at the bodies, and the people hungered, ravaged, no longer knowing what it meant, coming out and yanking the rats off the corpses and eating the rats. and *where* is Paris tonight? and *what is* Paris tonight? and my buddy is going to add shit on top of this and he smiles. well, he's twenty and mostly reads poetry. and poetry is just a wet rag in the dishpan.

and pot. they always equate pot with Revolution. pot just isn't that *good*. for Christ's sake, if they legalized pot half the people would stop smoking it. prohibition created more drunks than grandmother's warts. it's only what you can't do that you want to do. who wants to fuck their own wife every night? or, for that matter, even once a week?

there are a lot of things I would like to do. first off, I would like to stop getting such *very* ugly looking people for presidential nominees. then, I'd change the museums. there is nothing as depressing or quite as *stinky* as a museum. why there hasn't been a greater percentage of three-year-old girls molested on museum steps I'll never know. first off, I'd install at least one bar on each floor; this alone would pay all the salaries and would allow for regeneration and salvation of some of the paintings and the dropping sabre-toothed tiger whose asshole is beginning to look more like the 8-ball sidepocket. then I'd install a rock-band, a swing-band and a symphony band for each floor, plus three or four good-looking women to walk around and look good. you don't learn anything or *see* anything unless you vibrate. most people look at that sabre-tooth behind all that hot glass and just slink by, a little bit ashamed and a little bit bored.

but can't you see a guy and his wife, each a beer in hand, looking at the sabre-tooth, and saying, "god damn, look at those *tusks!* a little bit like an elephant, huh?"

and she'd say, "honey, let's go home and make love!"

and he'd say, "your *ass!* not until I go down to the basement and see that 1917 Spad. they say Eddie Rickenbacker flew it himself. got seventeen hun. besides, I hear they got the Pink Floyd down there."

but the Revolutionaries are going to burn the museum. they figure burning answers everything. they'd burn their grandmother if she couldn't run fast enough. and then they are going to look around for water or for somebody who can do an appendectomy or somebody who can keep the truly insane from cutting their throats as they sleep. and they are going to find out how many rats live in a city, not human rats but rat-rats. and they are going to find that the rats are the last things that drown, burn, starve; that they are the first things that can find food and water because they have been doing so for centuries without help. the rats are the true revolutionaries; the rats are the true underground, but they don't want your ass except to nibble on and they are not interested in OOOOOOOOOMMM.

I'm not saying give up. I'm for the true human spirit wherever it is, wherever it has been hiding, whatever it is. but beware of the cowboys who make it sound so good and leave you out on a plateau with 4 hard-core cops and eight or nine national guard boys and only your bellybutton as a last prayer. the boys screaming for your sacrifice in the public parks are usually the furthest away when the shooting begins. they want to live to write their memoirs.

it used to be the religion con. not the big church con, that was a drag. everybody bored, including the preacher. but the little storefront places, painted white. Jesus, how they carried on. I used to go in drunk and sit there and watch. especially after I was 86'd at the bars. it beat going home and beating my meat. the best religious con places were L.A., followed by N.Y. and Philly. those preachers were artists, man. they almost had me rolling on the floor too. most of those preachers recovering from hangovers, bloodshot eyes, needing more $$$ for something to drink or maybe even a pop, hell, I don't know.

they almost had me rolling on the floor and I was pretty cool and pretty tired. it was better than a piece of ass even if it only caught you halfway. I wish to thank these babies, most of them negroes, pardon me, blacks, for some entertaining nights; I think that if I have ever written any poetry that I might have stolen *some* of it from them.

but now that game is fading. God just didn't pay the rent or come up with that bottle of wine no matter how much they hollered or got their last clean clothes dirty on that floor. God said WAIT and it's hard to WAIT when your belly is empty and your soul don't feel so good and maybe you can only live to be 55 and the last time God showed up was almost 2,000 years ago and then He just did a few cheap carnival tricks, let some Jew outfox him, then blew the scene. a man gets g.d. tired of suffering. the teeth in his mouth are enough to kill him or the same same woman in the same same small room.

the religious con boys are moving in with the revolutionary con boys and you can't tell asshole from pussy, brothers. realize this, and you have a beginning. listen carefully, and you have a beginning. swallow it all, and you're dead. God got out of the tree, took the snake and Eden's tight pussy away and now you've got Karl Marx throwing golden apples down from the same tree, mostly in blackface.

if there is a battle, and I believe that there is, always has been, and that's what has made Van Goghs and Mahlers as well as Dizzy Gillespies and Charley Parkers, then please be careful of your leaders, for there are many in your ranks who would rather be president of General Motors than burn down the Shell Oil station around the corner. but since they can't have one, they take the other. these are the human rats of the centuries who have kept us where we are. this is Dubcek coming back from Russia a half-man, afraid of psychic death. a man must finally learn that it is better to die with his balls slowly cut off than to live any other way. foolish? no more foolish than the greatest miracle. but if you are caught in the trap, always understand what it is that you are trading for, exactly, or the soul will give way. Casanova used to run his fingers, his hands up the ladies dresses as men were torn apart in the king's courtyard; but Casanova died too, just an old guy with a big cock and a long tongue and no guts at all. to say that he lived well is true; to say that I could spit on his grave without feeling is also true. the ladies usually go for the biggest damn fool they can find; that is why the human race stands where it does today: we have bred the clever and lasting Casanovas, all hollow inside, like the chocolate Easter bunnies we foster upon our poor children.

the nest of the Arts like the nests of the Revolutionaries crawl with the most unimaginable licecovered freaks, seeking coca-cola solace because they can neither find jobs as dishwashers or paint like Cezanne. if the mold don't doesn't want you, the only thing to do is to pray or work for a new mold. and when you find that *that* mold doesn't want you, then why not another? everybody pleased in his certain way.

yet, old as I am, I am particularly pleased to live in this certain age. THE LITTLE MAN HAS SIMPLY GOTTEN TIRED OF TAKING TOO MUCH SHIT. it's happening everywhere. Prague. Watts. Hungary. Vietnam. it ain't government. it's Man against govt. it's Man who can no longer quite be fooled by a white Christmas with a Bing Crosby voice and dyed Easter eggs that must be hidden from kids who must WORK TO FIND THEM. of future presidents of America whose faces on TV screens must make you run to the bathroom and puke.

I like this time. I like this feeling. the young have finally begun to think. and the young have become more and more. but everytime they get a spearhead for their feelings that spearhead is murdered. the old and the entrenched are frightened. they know that the revolution can come through the voting polls in the American manner. we can kill them without a bullet. we can kill them by simply becoming more real and more human and voting out the shits. but they are clever. what do they offer us? Humphrey or Nixon. like I said, cold shit, warm shit, it's all shit.

the only thing that has kept me from being assassinated is that I am small shit, I have no politics, I observe. I have no sides except the side of the human spirit, which after all does sound rather shallow, like a pitchman, but which means mostly *my* spirit, which means *yours* too, for if I am not truly alive, how can I see you?

man, I'd like to see a good pair of shoes on every man walking the streets and see that he gets a good piece of ass and a bellyfull of food too. Christ, the last piece of ass I've had was in 1966 and I've been jacking off ever since. and there just ain't no jackoff compared to that wonder-hole.

it's tough times, brothers, and I don't know quite what to tell you. I'm white but I've got to agree — don't too much quite trust that paint job — it's soft and I don't too much like softshits either, but I've seen a lot of you black boys who can make me puke all the way from Venice West to Miami Beach. the Soul has no skin; the soul only has insides that want to SING, finally, can't you hear it, brothers? softly, can't you hear it, brothers? a hot piece of ass and a new Cadillac ain't going to solve a god-damned thing. Popeye will have one eye and Nixon will be your next president. Christ slipped off the cross and we are now nailed to the motherfucker, black and white, white and black, completely.

our choice is almost no choice. if we move too quickly, we are dead. if we do not move fast enough, we are dead. it isn't our deck of cards. how you gonna shit with a 2,000-foot Christian cork jammed up your ass?

to learn, do not read Karl Marx. very dry shit. please learn the spirit. Marx is only tanks moving through Prague. don't get caught this way please. first of all, read Celine. the greatest writer of 2,000 years. of course, *THE STRANGER* by Camus must fit in. *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT. THE BROTHERS*. all of Kafka. all the works of the unknown writer John Fante. the short stories of Turgenev. avoid Faulkner, Shakespeare, and especially George Bernard Shaw, the most overblown fantasy of the Ages, a real true-blown shit with political and literary connections beyond belief. the only younger guy I can think of with the road paved ahead for him and kissing ass whenever necessary was Hemingway, but the difference between Hemingway and Shaw was that Hem wrote some good early work and Shaw wrote completely flip and dull crap all the way through.

so, here we are mixing Revolution with Literature and they both fit. somehow everything fits, but I grow tired and wait for tomorrow.

will the Man be at my door?

who gives a damn?

I hope this made you spill your tea.

is this the way it ends? Death through the nose of Everywhere? how inexpensive. how plagiaristic. how brutal. — raw hamburger forgotten and stinking on the stove.

he vomited across his chest, too sick to move his body.

never mix pills with whiskey. man, they weren't kidding.

he could feel his soul floating out from under his body. he could feel it hang upside down there like a cat, its feet gripping the springs.

motherfucker, come back! he said to his soul.

his soul laughed, you've treated me too bad too long, baby. you're gettin' what you need.

it was about three a.m. in the morning.

with him it wasn't dying that mattered. with him it was the unsolved and loose parts left behind — a four-year-old daughter in some hippy camp in Arizona; stockings and shorts on the floor, dishes in the sink; an unpaid for car, gas bills, light bills, phone bills; and parts of him left in almost every state in the Union, parts of him left in the unwashed pussies of half a hundred whores; parts of him left on flagpoles and firescapes, empty lots, Catholic Church Communion classes, jail cells, boats; parts of him left in band-aids and down in sewers; parts of him left in thrown-away alarm clocks, thrown away shoes, thrown-away women, thrown-away friends …

it was so sad, so very sad. who could blow the blues the way they really were? nobody could. that's it. nobody could or ever did. they could only try and get bluer than blue because there was no way home.

he heaved again, then lay still. he could hear the crickets. crickets in Hollywood crickets along Sunset Blvd. healthy crickets: that's all he had.

I blew it, Jesus, I blew it, he thought.

yeah, brother, you blew it, said his soul.

but I want to see my little girl again, he said to his soul.

your little girl again? you're no artist! you're no *man!* you're *soft!*

I'm soft, he answered his soul, you're right, I'm soft.

he'd reached the end of cures. beer wouldn't go down. not even water. no pills, no pop, no hash, no grass, no love, no breeze, no sound — just crickets — no hope — just crickets — not even a match to burn the fucking place down.

then it got worse.

the same tune started playing over and over again in his head:

"you'd better tend to business Mr. Business man,

while you can ..."

and that was it. the same melody over and over again:

"you'd better tend to business Mr. Business man,

while you can ..."

"you'd better tend to ..."

"you'd better ..."

"you'd ..."

with an effort borrowed only from the madness of space (who can blow the blues? nobody can.) he reached up and turned on the little overhead lamp, which was then just an exposed electric bulb, the shade long ago smashed off (who can blow the blues?) and he picked up a postcard found in the mailbox a few days back and the postcard said: "dear — : we slap greetings at you while drenched in German beer and Schnapps, in stained-glass waiting ..."

the lines fell off into that sloppy and impolite scrawl of fat boys who live luckily upon the land without the need of excessive wit or courage.

something about leaving for England tomorrow. poems slowly coming. too much grease and few visitations. too much the world hanging by the tip of its cock.

"we consider you the greatest poet since Eliot."

then the professor's signature and his pet student's signature.

only since Eliot? what a short inch that was. he'd taught these bastards how to write a living poetry of clarity and now they were joyriding and finger-fucking Europe while he died alone in a skid-row room in Hollywood.

"you'd better tend to business Mr. Business man,

while you can ..."

he threw the postcard down on the floor. it didn't matter. if he could only feel some real good ace-high self-pity or some two-bit anger or some chickenshit vengeance, it could save him. but it was all dry inside of him, dry and silly and the way it had been for a long time.

the professors had begun knocking at the door about two years ago, trying to find out where it came from. and there was nothing to tell them. the professors were all the same — a bit pretty and rather rested in a female sort of way, gangling long legs, large picture window eyes, and finally rather stupid, and so their visits didn't please him at all. they were, in reality, only the fat-head nobles of a changing structure, which like an idiot in a candy store, refused to see the walls burning down. their candy was the mind.

— the clinging to the intellect, the clinging to the intellect, the clinging …

"you'd better tend to business, Mr. Business man,
while you can …"

and Jesus, *he* was soft. all the hard poems; he'd played hard-man all his life but he was soft. everybody was soft, really. — the hard was only there to protect the soft. what a ridiculous asshole trap.

he felt the need to get out of bed. it cost him. he heaved along the whole hallway. the retches brought up a pulpy green-yellow and some blood. first heat, then chills; then chills, then heat. and legs like rubbery elephant legs. flump. flump. flump. — and look (he winked at somebody somewhere): the moaning and terrified Eye of Confucius upon his last drink.

blow the blues.

he got into the front room thinking —

I am lucky to have a rented front room, even *now* —

"hey, Mr. Business man …"

and tried to sit on a chair, missed, hit the monkey tailbone hard on the floor, laughed, then looked at the telephone.

this is the way a Loner ends up: dead alone. dying alone.

a Loner should get ready early.

all my poems ain’t gonna help. all the women I ever screwed ain’t gonna help. and all the women I didn’t screw surely ain’t gonna help. I need somebody to blow me the blues. I need somebody to say, I understand, kid, now take it on in and die.

he looked at the phone. he thought and he thought and he thought, he thought about who he might phone who could blow him the blues, just say the easy word, and he went through the few that he knew out of the billions — he went through them one by one, the few that he knew, and he also knew that it was too early in the morning, hardly a convenient time to die, it wasn’t right, and that they’d only think that he was clowning or drunk or faking or maudlin or insane, and he couldn’t hate them or blame them for it — everybody was locked-off, jacked-off, chopped-off, everybody was in their own little cell. hey, Mr. Business man …

Motherfuck!

who’d ever invented the game had worked up a neat little masterwork. call him God, He had a shot over the eye coming. but He never showed so you could get Him in the sights. the Age of the Assassins had missed the Biggest One of all. earlier they’d almost got the Son, but He’d slipped on out and we still had to go on staggering over slippery bathroom floors. the Holy Ghost never showed; He just layed back and whipped his dick. the cleverest One of all.

if I could only phone my little daughter I could die happy, he thought.

his soul walked out of the bedroom holding to an empty can of beer. “ah, you soft, you soft soft *fuck!* your little daughter is in a hippy camp while her mother rubs the balls of idiots. *take* it, Loner, you *chickenshit!*”

“… you *need* love, you *need* love, love will get you in the end, my friend!”

get me in the End?

Big Ramrod Death, yeah.

he began laughing. then he stopped. heaved again. more blood this time. almost all blood.

he forgot about the phone and made it back to the couch.

"… you *need* love, you *need* love …"

well, thank god, he thought, they've switched records anyhow.

the dying didn't come as easy as he thought it would. there was blood everywhere and the shades were down. people were getting ready to go to work. once, rolling over, he seemed to see the bookcase, all his books of poems and he knew then that he'd failed, it didn't even go back to Eliot, not even to yesterday morning, he'd blew it, he was just another monkey in a tree dropping into the tiger's mouth, and it was sad for a moment but only for a moment.

it was all right and it didn't matter about blowing the blues. Satchmo, go home. Shostakovitch, in your Fifth, forget it. Peter III. Chike, because you'd married a nutty soprano with wrinkles showing under her eyes, and a lesbian when you were not even a man, forget it. we've all been tempted with the fire and we've all failed as cocksuckers, artists, painters, doctors, pimps, green berets, dishwashers, dentists, trapeze artists and pear-pickers.

each man nailed to his own special cross.

blow the blues.

"you *need* love, you *need* love …"

then he got up and pulled up all the shades. god damned shades were rotten. they snapped at the touch, fell apart, zipped a bitch-spurt of sound, fell to the floor.

god damned sun was rotten. bringing forth the same old flowers, the same old young girls of everywhere.

he watched the people going to work. he knew no more than he ever knew.

the unsecurity of knowledge was the same as the security of noknowledge.

neither was superior; neither was anything.

he put himself flat along the landlord's couch. his couch, for a moment.

after all that trouble there was nothing to it.

he died.

the little tailor was quite happy. he just sat there sewing. it was when the woman came to the door, rang the bell, that he became disturbed. “sour cream, I have sour cream for sale,” she told him. “get away, you stink,” he told her, “I don’t want your god damned sour cream!” *“eewwww!”* she said, “your place *stinks!* why don’t you throw out the garbage?” she ran off.

it was then that the tailor remembered the three dead bodies. one was in the kitchen, stretched along in front of the stove. another one was upright, hung by its collar in the closet, stiffened, standing there. and the third was in the bathtub, sitting upright, well, not exactly upright, for the head could just be seen above the rim of the tub. the flies were beginning to come around and that was bad. the flies seemed very happy with the bodies, they were drunk on the bodies, and when he swatted at them they became very angry. he’d never heard flies buzz in such anger. they even attacked and bit him, so he let them be.

he sat down to sew again and the bell rang again. looks like I’ll never get any sewing done, he thought.

it was his pal, Harry.

“hello, Harry.”

“hello, Jack.”

Harry came in. “what’s the stink?”

“dead bodies.”

“dead bodies? you kiddin’?”

“no, look around.”

Harry found them with his nose. he found the one in the kitchen, then the one in the closet, then the one in the bathtub. “why’d you kill ’em? you gone crazy? what are you going to do? why don’t you hide the bodies, get rid of them? are you crazy? why’d you kill them? why don’t you call the police? are you out of your mind? god, it STINKS! listen, man, don’t get NEAR me! what are you going to do? what’s going on? ARRRG! THE STINK! I’M GETTING SICK!”

Jack just kept on sewing. he just sewed and sewed and sewed. it was like he was trying to hide.

"Jack, I'm going to call the police."

Harry went toward the phone but then he got sick. he went to the bathroom and vomited in the crapper while the head of the dead body in the tub stuck out just over the rim.

he came out and made the phone. he found that by taking out the mouthpiece he could slip his penis into the phone. he slid it back and forth and it felt good. very good. soon he completed his act, hung up the phone, zipped up and sat down across from Jack.

"Jack, are you insane?"

"Becky says she thinks that I'm crazy. she threatens to have me committed."

Becky was Jack's daughter.

"does she know about all these dead bodies?"

"not yet. she's on a trip to New York. she's a buyer for one of the large department stores. got herself a good job. I'm proud of that girl."

"does Maria know?"

Maria was Jack's wife.

"Maria don't know. she don't come around no more. since she got that job at the bakery she thinks she's something. she's living with another woman. sometimes I think she's turned into a dyke."

"well, man, I can't call the police on you. you're my friend. you'll have to settle it yourself. but do you mind telling me why you killed these people?"

"I disliked them."

"but you don't go around killing people you dislike."

"I disliked them very much."

"Jack?"

"eh?"

"you want to use the phone?"

"if you don't mind."

"it's your phone, Jack."

Jack got up and unzipped. he slipped his penis into the phone. he slid it back and forth and it felt good. he completed the act, zipped up, sat down and began sewing again. then the phone rang. he went back to the phone.

“oh, Hello, Becky! nice of you to call! I feel all right. oh yeah, we took the mouthpiece out of the phone, that’s why. Harry and I. Harry’s here now. Harry’s what? you really think so? I think he’s all right. nothing. I’m just sewing. Harry’s sitting here. a kind of a dark afternoon. really gloomy when you think about it. no sun. people walking by the window with ugly faces. yes, I’m all right. I feel all right. no, not yet. but I have a frozen lobster in the refrigerator. I just love lobster. no, I haven’t seen her. she thinks she’s hot shit now. yes, I’ll tell her. don’t worry. Goodbye, Becky.”

Jack hung up and sat down again, began sewing again.

“you know,” said Harry, “that reminds me. when I was a young man — god *damn* these flies! I’m not DEAD! — when I was a young man I used to have this job, me and this other kid. the job was washing down these dead bodies. we got some good-looking women in there sometimes. I came in one time and Mickey, that was the other kid, had mounted one of these women. ‘Mickey!’ I said, ‘what are you DOING? SHAME!’ he just looked at me sideways and kept going. when he got down he said, ‘Harry, I’ve screwed at least a dozen of them. it’s good! try her. you’ll see!’ ‘oh, no!’ I said. one time when I was washing down a real good one, I fingered her. but I never could do more than that.”

Jack kept sewing.

“you think you would have tried one, Jack?”

“hell, I don’t know! I have no way of knowing.”

he kept sewing. then he said, “listen, Harry, I’ve had a hard week. I want to eat something and get some sleep. I’ve got some lobster. but I’m funny. I like to eat alone. I don’t enjoy eating with people. so?”

“so? you want me to leave? you’re a bit upset. so, o.k., I’ll leave.”

Harry stood up.

"don't go away mad, Harry. we're still friends. let's keep it that way. we've been friends a long time."

"sure, since '33. those were the days! FDR. the NRA. the WPA. but we made it. these kids today just don't know."

"they sure don't."

"well, goodbye, Jack."

"goodbye, Harry."

Jack walked Harry to the door, opened the door, watched him walk away. still the same old baggy pants. the guy always did dress like a schmuck.

then Jack walked into the kitchen, got the lobster out of the freezer and read the instructions. they always had fucked-up instructions. then he noticed the body in front of the stove. he'd have to get rid of the body. the blood had long ago dried underneath it. the blood had long ago hardened on the floor. the sun finally came out from behind a cloud and it was very late afternoon, almost evening and the sky became pink and some of the pink came through the kitchen window. you could almost see it come through, slowly, like the giant feeler of a snail. the body was face downward, face turned toward the stove, and under the body the right arm was twisted with the open upturned hand sticking just outside of the left side of the body. the pink feeler of the snail lit on the hand, it made the hand pink. Jack noticed the hand. so pink, it looked so innocent. just a hand, a pink hand by itself. it was like a flower. for a moment Jack thought it had moved. no, it hadn't moved. a pink hand. just a hand. an innocent hand. Jack stood there looking at the hand. then he sat down with the lobster and looked at the hand. then he began to cry. he put the lobster down and put his head in his arms there at the table and began to cry. he cried for a very long time. he cried like a woman. he cried like a child. he cried like anything. then he walked into the other room and picked up the phone.

"operator, I want the police department. yes, I know that it sounds funny; the mouthpiece is missing, but I want the police department."

Jack waited.

"yes? well, listen, I've killed a man! three men! I'm serious, *yes*, I'm serious! I want you to come get me. and bring a wagon to take the bodies. I'm insane. I've lost my mind. I don't know how it happened. what?"

Jack gave them the address.

"what? that's because the mouthpiece is missing. I did. I screwed the phone."

the man kept on talking but Jack hung up. he walked back to the kitchen and sat down at the table and put his head back in his arms. he didn't cry anymore. he just sat there with the sun now no longer pink; the sun was gone and it was getting dark, and then he thought about Becky and then he thought about killing himself and then he didn't think about anything. the packaged South African lobster sat by his left elbow. he never got to eat that lobster.

I had gotten a bit drunk one night when this guy who had published a couple of my books said to me, "Bukowski, you want to go see L?"

L — was a famous writer. had been a famous writer for some time. works translated into everything, dog turds even. grants, mistresses, wives, prizes, novels, poems, short stories, paintings … stays in Europe. acquainted with the great. all that.

"no, shit, no," I said to Jensen, "his stuff bores me."

"but you say that about everybody."

"well, it's true."

Jensen sat and looked at me. Jensen liked to sit and look at me. he couldn't understand why I was so stupid. I was stupid. but so was the moon.

"he wants to meet you. he's *heard* of you."

"he has? and I've heard of him."

"you'd be surprised how many people have heard of you. I was over at N.A.'s the other night and she said she wanted you to come to dinner. you know, she knew L. in Europe."

"she did?"

"and they both knew Artaud."

"yeah, and she wouldn't give Artaud a piece of ass."

"that's right."

"I don't blame her. I wouldn't either."

"do me a favor. let's go see him."

"Artaud?"

"no, L."

I finished my drink.

"let's go."

it was a long drive from skid row to L's place. and L. had a place. Jensen ran the car up the driveway and the driveway was as long as an ordinary freeway off-ramp.

"is this the guy who is always hollering POVERTY?" I asked.

"it's said he owes the government 85 grand in back taxes."

"poor devil."

we got out of the car. it was a three-story house. there was a swing on the front porch and a $250 guitar laying in the swing. a big ass German shepherd ran up, snarling, foaming and I held him off with the guitar and I don't mean by playing it, I mean by swinging it while Jensen rang the bell.

this yellow wrinkled face opened a peephole and said,

"who's there?"

"Bukowski and Jensen."

"who?"

"Bukowski and Jensen."

"I don't know you."

the German shepherd leaped, his teeth just clicking past my jugular as he flew by. I banged him good when he landed but he just shook himself and coiled to leap again, hair raising, showing me those dirty yellow teeth.

"Bukowski. he wrote, *ALL THE DAMN TIME*, *SCREAMING IN THE RAIN*. I'm Hilliard Jensen, *NEW MOUNTAIN PRESS*."

the shepherd gave a last pissed-off snarl before readying to leap when L. said, "oh, Poopoo, stop that!"

Poopoo uncoiled a bit.

"nice Poopoo," I said, "nice Poopoo!"

Poopoo looked at me knowing that I was lying. finally old man L. opened the door. "well, come in," he said.

I threw the broken guitar into the swing and we walked in. the front room was like an underground parking lot.

"sit down," said L. I had a choice of three or four chairs, took the closest one.

"I give the establishment one more year," said L. "the people have awakened. we are going to burn the whole fucking thing down."

L. snapped his finger — "it will be gone" (snap) "like that! a new and better life for all of us!"

"got anything to drink?" I asked.

L. rang a little bell by his chair. "MARLOWE!" he screamed.

then he looked at me: "I read your last book, Mr. Meade."

"no, I'm Bukowski," I said.

he turned to Jensen, "then *you're* Taylor Meade! forgive me!"

"no, no, I'm Jensen. Hilliard Jensen. NEW MOUNTAIN."

just then a Japanese, black shiny pants, white jacket, trotted into the room, bowed just a bit, smiling, like some day he would kill us all.

"Marlowe, you stupid fuck, these gentlemen want some drinks; take their orders, posthaste, and return quickly or I'll have your ass!"

curiously, L's face looked as if all pain had been removed. although there were wrinkles, the wrinkles seemed more or less rivulets, sewed on or painted on, or *thrown* on. an odd face. yellow. bald. tiny eyes. a hopeless and insignificant face, at first glance. but *then*, how could he have written all *that?* "Oh, Mack had a big dick! Oh, Mack had the biggest dick! what a dick Mack had! Mack had the biggest dick in town. biggest West of the Mississippi. everybody talked about Mack's dick. oh, Mack had a big dick …" etc. when it came to style, L. had them all beat, even tho' I did find it dull.

Marlowe came back with the drinks and I'll say something for Marlowe: he poured them tall and he poured them strong. he left them and trotted off. I watched his haunches bobbing in his tight pants as he ran back into the kitchen where he belonged.

L. had already looked drunk. he drained half his glass. a scotch and water man. “I’ll always remember that hotel in Paris. we were all there. kaja, Hal Norse, Burroughs … the greatest literary minds of our generation.”

“do you think it helped your writing, Mr. L.?” I asked.

it was a stupid question. he looked at me sternly, then allowed me to watch him smile, “everything helps my writing.”

we all just sat there then, drinking and looking at each other. L. rang the bell again and Marlowe trotted in for the refueling process.

“Marlowe,” said L., “is translating Edna St. Vincent Millay into the Japanese.”

“wonderful,” said Jensen of NEW MOUNTAIN.

I don’t see a damn thing wonderful about translating Edna St. Vincent Millay into the Japanese, I thought.

“I don’t see a damn thing wonderful about translating Edna St. Vincent Millay into the Japanese,” said L.

“well, Millay is dated, but what’s wrong with modern poetry?” asked the NEW MOUNTAIN.

too young, too quick and they quit too soon, I thought.

“no lasting qualities,” said the old man.

I don’t know. everybody stopped talking. we really didn’t like each other. Marlowe trotted in and out with the drinks. I got the feeling that I was in a terrible underground cave or a movie without meaning. just unattached scenes. toward the end, L. got up once and slapped Marlowe, hard. I didn’t know what it meant. sex? boredom? play? Marlowe grinned and ran back to Millay’s cunt.

“let no man enter my home who cannot bear all shadow and bear all light,” said L.

“look, man,” I said, “I think you’re full of shit. I never did like your stuff.”

“and I never liked your stuff either, Meade,” said the old man, “all that stuff about sucking-off movie stars. anybody can suck-off a movie star. that’s no big thing.”

“it *can* be,” I said, “and I’m not Meade!”

the old man got up and wobbled toward my chair, translated into eighteen languages.

“you want to fight or fuck?” he asked.

“I want to fuck,” I said.

“MARLOWE!” screamed L.

Marlowe trotted in and L. screamed, “DRINKS!”

I had REALLY expected him to ask M. to drop his pants so I could have my wish, but it didn’t happen. I simply watched M.’s haunches wobble as he ran back into the kitchen.

we began on the new rounds. “like that” (snap!) said L., “the establishment is finished! we burn them down!”

then the old man’s head fell forward and he dozed, he was finished.

“let’s go,” said Jensen.

“wait a minute,” I said. I walked over to the old man and ran my arm down the back of his rocker, down toward his ass.

“what are you doing?” asked Jensen.

“everything helps my writing,” I said, “and this bastard is loaded.”

I got down and got the wallet and said, “let’s go!”

“you shouldn’t,” said Jensen and we walked toward the front door.

something had my right arm and then it was hammer-locked behind my back.

“we leave ALL MONIES HERE BEFORE LEAVING IN HONOR OF MR. L!” said the translator of E. V. Millay.

“you’re breaking my god damned arm, you slant-eyed chicken-shit!”

“WE LEAVE ALL MONIES HERE! HONOR MR. L!” he screamed it.

“CLUB HIM, JENSEN! CLUB HIM ONE! GET THIS FUCKER OFF ME!”

"your friend touch me, your arm is BROKEN!"

"all right, take the wallet. to hell with it! I've got a check coming from GROVE PRESS."

he took L.'s wallet, dropped it to the floor. then he took *mine*, dropped it to the floor.

"hey, wait a MINUTE! what are you? some kinda god damned crook?"

"WE LEAVE ALL MONIES HERE! HONOR MR. L!"

"I don't believe it. this is worse than a whorehouse."

"now, tell your friend to drop his wallet on floor or I break your arm!"

Marlowe added a little pressure to show me that it could be done.

"Jensen! your wallet! DROP IT!"

Jensen dropped his wallet. Marlowe let go of my arm. I turned on him. I only had the left one to work with.

"Jensen?" I asked.

he looked at Marlowe.

"no," he said.

I looked at the old man as he dozed. there seemed to be a little tender smile upon his lips.

we opened the door, went outside.

"nice Poopoo," I said.

"nice Poopoo," said Jensen.

we got into the car.

"any more people you want me to visit tonight?" I asked.

"well, I was thinking of Anaïs Nin."

"stop thinking. I don't think I could handle her."

Jensen backed it out the drive. it was just another warm Southern California night. soon we found Pico Blvd. and Jensen headed East. the Revolution couldn't come too fucking fast for me.

" 'Red,' " I told the kid, "to the female I no longer exist. much of it is my fault. I don't go to dances, church bazaars, poetry readings, love-ins, all that shit, and this is where the whores hustle. I used to make it in the bars or on the train back from Del Mar, anywhere drinking was going on. now I can't stand the bars anymore. those guys just sitting there, lonely, passing the hours, hoping some syphed-up hole will drop in. the whole scene is disgraceful to the human race."

'Red' flipped a beerbottle through the air, caught it, broke off the cap on the end of my coffee table.

"it's all in the mind, Bukowski. you don't need it."

"it's all in the end of my pecker, 'Red.' I need it."

"once we got hold of this old wino gal. we tied her to a bed with rope. charged 50 cents a piece. every cripple, madman and freak on the row must have got a piece of ass. in three days and three nights we must have passed through 500 patrons."

"jesus christ, 'Red,' you're making me sick!"

"I thought you were the Dirty Old Man."

"it's just that I don't change my stockings every day. did you let her up to urinate or defecate?"

"what's 'defecate'?"

"oh shit. did you feed her?"

"winos don't eat. we gave her wine."

"I'm sick."

"why?"

"it was beastly cruel, beastly inhuman. come to think of it, the beasts wouldn't do it."

"we made $250."

"what'd you give her?"

"nothing. we left her in there, two more days on the rent."

"did you untie her?"

"sure, we didn't want a murder rap."

"very nice of you."

"you talk like a preacher."

"have another beer."

"I can get you some pussy."

"how much? 50 cents?"

"no, a little more than that."

"no, thanks."

"see, you don't really want it."

"I guess you're right."

we each went for another beer. he put it down pretty good. then he stood up. "see, I always carry a little razor, right here, under my belt. most bums have problems shaving. not me. I'm ready.

and when I'm on the road I wear two pair of pants — see — and I take off the outside pair when I hit town, shave, got a wash and wear white shirt on under my navy blue, I rinse it out in the sink, got a strip necktie, I buff my shoes, pick up a matching coat to the pants at a 2nd hand store and two days later I got me a white collar job among the shits. they don't know I just got off a boxcar. but I can't stand them jobs. next thing I know I'm back on the road."

I didn't know what to say about that, so I maintained a silence and kept drinking.

"and I always carry this little ice pick just up my sleeve in this elastic strap halfway up my arm, see?"

"yeah, I see. a friend of mine says a beer can opener is a great weapon."

"your friend's right. now when the cops stop me I always flip the ice pick out, I throw up my arms, holler, DON'T SHOOT! — "

('Red' went through the act on the rug)

" — and I flip the ice pick out. they never find it on me. I don't know how many ice picks I've flipped off. countless."

"have you ever used the ice pick, 'Red'?"

he gave me a very strange look.

"o.k.," I said, "forget the question."

so we sat there again sucking at the beer.

"I came across your column once in this rooming house. I think you're a great writer."

"thanks," I said.

"I've tried to be a writer but it doesn't come out. I sit down and it doesn't come out."

"how old are you?"

"twenty-one."

"give it time."

he sat there thinking about being a writer. then he reached into his back pocket.

"they gave me this to keep me quiet."

it was a leather wallet woven into fine strips.

"who?"

"I saw these two guys kill a guy and they gave me this to keep me quiet."

"why'd they kill him?"

"he had this wallet with seven dollars in it."

"how'd they kill him?"

"with a rock. he was drinking wine and when he got drunk they cracked his head with a rock. and took the wallet. I was watching."

"what'd they do with the body?"

"early in the morning the train made a water stop. they carried his body out and dumped it just below one of those cattle runways, down in the grass. then they got back in the car and the train moved on."

"ummmm," I said.

"the cops find a body like that later, look at the clothes, the wino-face, no 'ident.' they just erase the case from the books. just another bum. it don't matter."

we sat there a few more hours drinking and I told a few, not nearly as good. then we both got silent. kept thinking. then 'Red' stood up.

"well, listen, man, I gotta get rolling. but it's been a good night."

I stood up.

"it sure has, 'Red.' "

"well, shit, see you around."

"shit, yes, 'Red.' "

there was some kind of hesitancy in leaving. in a sense, it had been a good night.

"see you, kid."

"o.k., Bukowski."

I watched him go around the bush to the left, out toward Normandie, out toward Vermont where he had a room with three or four days rent left, and then he was gone and what was left of the moon shone in, she did, and I closed the door, drained a last tired beer, lights out, I made it to the bed, got the clothes off, dropped in as down in the railroad yards they moved across the tracks picking cars, places, hoped destinations — better towns, better times, better love, better luck, better something. they'd never find it, they'd never stop looking.

I slept.

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his name was Henry Beckett and it was a Monday morning, he had just gotten up, looked out the window at a woman in a very short mini-skirt, thinking, I am almost getting used to it, that's too bad. yet a woman has to have something on or there's nothing to take off. raw meat is only raw meat.

he was already in his shorts and moved to the bathroom to shave. when he looked into the mirror he saw that his face was gold-colored with green polka dots. he looked again, still holding the shaving brush in his hand. then the brush dropped to the floor. the face stayed in the mirror: goldcolored with green polka dots. the walls began to move. Henry held to the wash basin. then, somehow, he moved back to the bedroom, threw himself belly down on the bed. he stayed there five minutes, his mind flupping, throbbing, probing, puking. then he got up and walked to the bathroom and looked into the mirror again: gold-face with green polka dots. bright gold face with bright green polka dots.

he went to the phone. "yes, hello. this is Henry Beckett. I won't be able to get in today. I'm sick. what? oh, a terribly upset stomach. terribly upset."

he hung up.

walked to the bathroom again. it was useless. the face was still there. he filled the bathtub with water, then went to the phone.

the nurse wanted to give him an appointment for next *Wednesday*.

"listen, this is an *emergency!* I've got to see the doctor *today!* it's life and death! I can't tell you, no, I can't tell you, but *please*, squeeze me in today! you've got to!"

she gave him a 3:30 appointment.

he took off his shorts and got into the tub. he noticed that his body was also gold with green polka dots. everywhere. it covered his belly, his back, his testicles, his penis. it wouldn't rub off with soap. he got out, toweled himself, put his shorts back on.

the phone rang. it was Gloria. his girl friend. she worked down there.

"Gloria, I can't tell you what's wrong. it's awful. no, I don't have the syph. it's worse than that. I can't tell you. you wouldn't believe it."

she said she was coming over on her lunch hour.

"please don't, baby, I'll kill myself."

"I'm coming over right *now*!" she said.

"please, PLEASE don't…"

she had hung up. he looked at the phone, put it down, walked into the bathroom again. no change. he went back to the bedroom, stretched out, looked at the cracks in the ceiling. it was the first time he had noticed the cracks in the ceiling. they looked very warm, charming, friendly. he could hear the traffic, an occasional bird-chirp, voices in the street — a woman telling a child, "well, walk *faster*, please," and every now and then the sound of a motor-driven airplane.

the doorbell rang. he went into the front room and peeked through the curtains. it was Gloria in a white blouse with light blue summer skirt. she looked better than he had ever seen her. a strawberry blonde booming with life; nose a little too ugly, a little too fat, but after you got used to the nose you loved that too. he could feel his heart ticking like a bomb in an empty closet. it was as if his guts had been scooped out and just the heart was in there, whaling hollow. wailing hollow.

“I can’t let you in, Gloria!”

“open this goddamned door, you silly ass!”

he could see her trying to look at him through the curtains.

“Gloria, you don’t understand …”

“I said, ‘OPEN THIS DOOR!’ ”

“all right,” he said, “goddamn it, all right!”

he could feel the sweat circling his head, dripping behind his ears, running down his neck.

he threw the door open.

“JESUS!” she half-screamed, putting her hand to her mouth.

“I TOLD you, I tried to TELL you, I TOLD you!”

he backed up. she closed the door and moved toward him.

“what is it?”

“I dunno. christ, I dunno. don’t touch me, don’t touch. it might be contagious.”

“poor Henry, oh, my poor boy …”

she kept coming toward him. he tripped over a wastebasket.

“god damn it, I told you to stay away!”

“why, you’re almost pretty!”

“ALMOST!” he screamed, “BUT I CAN’T SELL INSURANCE THIS WAY, CAN I?”

they both began laughing then. then he was on the couch and he was crying. he had his gold and green face in his hands and he was crying.

“god, why can’t it be cancer, heart attack, something nice and clean? God has shitted on me, that’s all, God has shitted on me!”

she was kissing him along the neck and through his hands that covered his face. he pushed her away, “stop it, stop it!”

“I love you, Henry, I don’t care about all this.”

“you goddamned women are crazy.”

“sure. now, when do you see the doctor?”

“3:30.”

“I’ve got to get back to the office. phone me when you find something out. I’ll be by tonight.”

“o.k., o.k.,” then she was gone.

at 3:10 he had a hat pulled low over his eyes and a scarf around his throat. he had dark shades on. he drove to the doctor's looking straight ahead, trying to appear invisible. nobody seemed to notice him.

in the doctor's office they were all reading *LIFE, LOOK, NEWSWEEK* and so forth. there were hardly enough chairs and sofas and it was hot in there. the pages turned. he looked down at his magazine, trying not to be seen. it went all right for fifteen or twenty minutes and then a little girl who had been running around bouncing a balloon, bounced it near him, it bounced off his shoe and when it bounced off his shoe she caught it and looked at him. then she went back to a very ugly-looking woman with ears like small pancakes and eyes like the insides of spiders' souls and she said, "Mommy, what's wrong with that man's FACE?"

and Mommy said, "sssssshhhh!"

"BUT IT'S ALL YELLOW WITH BIG PURPLE SPOTS ALL OVER IT!"

"Mary Ann, I TOLD you to be QUIET! now you just SIT here by me for a while and stop that runnin' around! NOW, I said SIT DOWN HERE!"

"ah, *Mommy!*"

the little girl sat down, sniffling, looking at his face, sniffling and looking at his face.

the little girl and Mommy were called in. others were called in, others entered, left. finally the doctor called him.

"Mr. Beckett."

he followed the Dr. in. "how are you, Mr. Beckett?"

"look at me and you'll see."

the doctor turned around. "Good God!" he said.

"yeah," said Mr. Beckett.

"I've never seen *anything* like it! please disrobe and sit on the table. when did this first occur?"

"this morning when I woke up."

"how do you feel?"

"like I'm smeared with shit that won't come off."

"I mean, physically."

"I felt fine until I saw the mirror."

the doctor wrapped the tube around his arm.

"blood pressure, normal."

"let's cut the horseshit, Dr. you'll be asking me to step on the scales next. you don't know what it is, do you?"

"no, never have I seen anything like it."

"your grammar is bad, Dr. where are you from?"

"Austria."

"Austria. what are you going to do with me?"

"I do not know. maybe a skin specialist, hospitalization, tests."

"I'm sure they'd find me very interesting. but it won't go away."

"what won't go away?"

"what I've got. I can feel it inside. it won't go away, ever."

the doctor began to listen to his heart. Beckett knocked the stethoscope away. he began to get dressed.

"don't be hasty, Mr. Beckett. please!"

then he was dressed and out of there. he left the hat, scarf, dark shades. he made it to his place and got his hunting rifle and enough rounds of ammunition to kill a batallion. he found the cutoff on the freeway that led to the knoll. the knoll overlooked a slow turn that cut the speed of the cars down. why he'd ever noticed the knoll he never knew. he got out of the car and climbed to the top of the highest hill. he dusted the telescopic sight, loaded, took off the safety catch and flattened out.

at first he didn't get it right. each time he fired the shot appeared to hit behind the car. then he practiced leading the cars into the bullet. the speeds of each of the cars were practically the same, but instinctively he varied the lead to the changing speed of each car. the first one he got was very strange. the bullet entered the right forehead and the man seemed to look right up at him, and then the car flipped, it hit the fence, flipped on its side and he shot at the next one coming by, a woman, missed, hit her engine, there was fire, and she just sat in the car screaming and waving her arms and burning. he didn’t want to see her burn. he shot her. the traffic stopped. people got out of their cars. he decided not to shoot any more women. bad taste. or children. bad taste. a doctor from Austria. why didn’t they stay in Austria? weren’t there any sick in Austria? he got four or five more men before they knew a shooting was going on. then the patrol cars came and the ambulances. they blocked off the freeway. he let them load the dead and wounded into the ambulance. he didn’t shoot at the attendants. he shot at the cops. he got one cop. a real bulky one. he lost sense of time. it got dark. he sensed they were moving up the knoll toward him. he didn’t stay in the same position. he moved toward them. he caught two of them in ambush from the left flank. then some firing from his right drove him toward the knoll. they were backing him up. an established position was the worst thing. he tried to make one more break but the fire was too heavy. he slowly backed toward the knoll, saving what ground he could. he could hear them talking and cursing. there were many of them. he stopped firing and waited. he got one more, seeing a pantleg through the brush, he aimed where he thought the trunk of the body would be, heard a scream, then moved further up the knoll. it was getting darker. Gloria would have dumped him. he would have dumped Gloria with a paint job like that. can you imagine taking a purple and gold girl to a concert of Brahms?

then they had him on top of the knoll but there wasn’t any brush coverage for them. jut small-sized boulders. and all of them wanted to go home alive. he decided he could hold for quite a while. they began to shoot flares up on the knoll. he shot some of them off but parts of others remained and soon there were too many flares burning to knock out. they were potting at him, getting closer … shit. shit. well.

a flare lit particularly close and Henry could see his hands on the rifle. he looked again. his hands were WHITE.

WHITE!

it was *gone!*

he was WHITE, WHITE, WHITE!

"HEY!" he screamed, "I QUIT! I GIVE UP! I QUIT!"

Henry ripped at his shirt, looked at his chest: WHITE.

he took his shirt off, tied it to the end of his rifle, waved it. they stopped firing. the ridiculous mad dream was over, the polka-dot man was finished, the clown gone; what a joke, what shit, had it happened? it couldn't have happened. it must have been his mind. or had it happened? had Hiroshima happened? had anything ever really happened?

he threw his rifle down toward them, he threw it hard. then he walked slowly down toward them, his hands high over his head, hollering, "I QUIT! I SURRENDER! SURRENDER! I SURRENDER!"

he could hear voices as he moved toward them.

"what are we going to do, man?"

"I don't know. watch for tricks."

"he killed Eddie and Weaver. I hate his guts."

"he's getting closer."

"I QUIT! I SURRENDER!"

one of the cops fired five shots. three in the belly, two in the lungs. they left him out there a good minute before anybody moved. then they came out. the one who shot him got there first. he turned the body over with his boot, from the front to the back. he was a black cop, Adrian Thompson, 236 pounds, a home almost paid for near the west side, and he grinned down in the moonlight.

the traffic on the freeway was moving again, as usual.

* * *

everywhere we hang onto the walls of the world, and in the darkest part of hangover, I think of two friends who advise me on various methods of suicide. what better proof of loving camaraderie? one of my friends has razor scars running all along his left arm. the other jams pills by the bucketloads into a mass of black beard. they both write poetry. there is something about writing poetry that brings a man close to the cliff's edge. probably, though, all three of us will live into our nineties. can you imagine the world of 2010 a.d.? of course, the way it will look will depend a lot on what is done with the Bomb. I suppose men will still eat eggs for breakfast, have sex problems. write poetry. commit suicide.

I think that it was in 1954 that I last tried suicide. I was living on the third floor in an apartment building on N. Mariposa Avenue. I closed all the windows and turned on the oven and the gas jets, without lighting them, of course. then I stretched out on the bed. escaping unlit gas has this very soothing hiss. I went to sleep. it would have worked too, only inhaling the gas gave me such a headache that the headache awakened me. I got up off the bed, laughing, and saying, “You damn fool, you don’t want to kill yourself!” I turned off the gas and opened up the windows. I kept laughing. it seemed a very funny joke. then too, the automatic pilot on the stove wasn’t working or that little flame would have blasted me right out of my precious little season in Hell.

a few years earlier I awakened from a week’s drunk and pretty determined to kill myself. I was shacked with a sweet little thing at the time and not working. the money was gone, the rent was due, and even if I had been able to find a flunk’s job of some sort, that would have only seemed like another kind of death. I decided to kill myself when she left the room the first time. meanwhile, I went outside on the street, slightly curious, just slightly, as to what day it was. on our drunks, days and nights ran together. we just drank and made love continually. it was about noon and I walked down the hill to check the corner newspaper for the day. Friday, the paper said. well, Friday seemed as good a day as any. then I saw the headline. MILTON BERLE’S COUSIN HIT ON HEAD BY FALLING ROCK. now how the hell are you going to kill yourself when they write headlines like that? I stole a paper and brought it back to the room. “guess what?” I asked. “what?” she said. “Milton Berle’s cousin was hit on the head by a falling rock.” “no SHIT?” “yeah.” “I wonder what kind of rock it was?” “I think it was a kind of round smooth yellow one.” “yeah, I think so too.” “I wonder what color eyes Milton Berle's cousin has?" "I'd guess they're a kind of brown, a very pale brown." "pale brown eyes, light yellow rock." "CLUNK!" "yeah, CLUNK!" I went out and cuffed a couple of bottles and we had a fairly nice day after all. I think the paper with that headline that day was something called "The Express" or "The Evening Herald." I'm not sure. anyway, I wish to thank whatever paper it was and also Milton Berle's cousin and that round smooth yellow rock.

well, since the subject seems to be suicide, I remember once I was working on the docks, we used to eat our lunch on those Frisco docks with our feet hanging over the edge of the pier. well, one day I am sitting there when this guy next to me takes off his shoes and stockings, piles them very neatly by his side. he was sitting next to me. then I heard the splash and he was down in there. it was very strange, he screamed "HELP!" just before his head hit the water. then there was just this little whirling puddle and not feeling very much at all, just watching those air bubbles come up. then a man ran up to me and started screaming at me, "DO SOMETHING! HE'S TRYING TO TRY TO COMMIT SUICIDE!" "hell, what'll I do?" "get a rope, throw him a rope or something!" I jumped up and ran to a shack where an old man wrapped packages and cartons. "GIMME SOME ROPE!" he just looked at me. "GODDAMN IT, GIVE ME SOME ROPE, A MAN'S DROWNING, I GOTTA THROW HIM ROPE!" the old man turned around and got something. then he held it out to me. he held it out between his two fingers — it was a little piece of shriveled white string. "YOU ROTTEN SON OF A BITCH!" I screamed at him.

by then a young man had peeled down to his shorts and dived in and brought our suicide up. the young man was given the rest of the day off with pay. our suicide claimed he had fallen in by accident but he couldn't explain away the taking off of the shoes and stockings bit. I never saw him again. maybe he finished the job that night. you can never tell what is troubling a man. even trivial things can become terrible when you get into a certain mind-state. and the worst worry/fear/agony tiredness of them all is the one you can't explain or understand or even think out. it just lays on you like a slab of sheet metal and there's no getting it off. not even for $25 an hour. I know. suicide? suicide seems incomprehensible unless you yourself are thinking about it. you don't have to belong to the Poet's Union in order to join the club. I was living in this cheap hotel when I was a younger man and my friend was an older man, an ex-con, who had a job scrubbing out the insides of candy-making machines. it doesn't seem like much to live for, does it? anyhow we drank together some nights and he seemed a good sort, a kind of big 45-year-old kid, loose and easy, not vicious at all. Lou was his name. x-hard rock miner. nose like a hawk. big, mangled hands, scuffed shoes, uncombed hair, not as good with the ladies as I was — at that time. anyhow, he missed a day's work because of drinking and the big rock candy boys let him go. he came in and told me about it. I told him to forget it — a job just ate up a man's good hours anyhow. I didn't seem to impress him very much with my home-spun stuff and he left. I went down to his door a couple of hours later to bum a couple of smokes. he didn't answer my knock so I figured he was in there drunk. I tried the door and it opened. there he was on the bed with the gas jets going. I guess the Southern California Gas Co. just doesn't realize how many people they serve. anyhow, I opened the windows and turned off the gas hotplate and his gas heater. he didn't have a stove. just an x-con who had lost his candy-machine scrubbing job because he had missed one day's work. "the boss tells me I'm the best worker he ever had. the thing is I miss too many days — 2 last month. he tells me if I miss another I'm finished."

I walked over to the bed and shook him. "you rotten mother!"

"wha'?"

"you rotten mother, you ever do that again I'm going to kick your ass all over this rotten town!"

"hey, Ski, you SAVED MY LIFE! I OWE YOU MY LIFE! YOU SAVED MY LIFE!"

he kept on this “you-saved-my-life” bit all through a couple of weeks of drunks. he’d lean toward my girl friend with that hawknose, put his big mangled hand on her hand or, worse, her knee, and say, “Hey, this rotten son of a bee saved my LIFE! YA KNOW THAT?”

“you’ve told me many times, Lou.”

“YEAH, HE SAVED MY LIFE!”

a couple of days later he left, two weeks behind in the rent. I never saw him again.

this has been some hangover but talking about suicide beats doing it. or does it? I am down to my last beer and my radio on the floor plays music from Japan. the phone just rang. some drunk. long distance. from New York. “listen, man, as long as they trot out one Bukowski every fifty years, I’m gonna make it.” I allow myself to enjoy this, to manipulate it in my favor because I have the deep blue skies, the honed-edge fever. “remember those drunks we used to go on, man?” he asks. “yeah, I remember.” “whatcha doin’ now, ya still writing?” “yeah, right now I’m writing about suicide.” “suicide?” “yeah, I have this column, kind of, in a new paper that’s starting, OPEN CITY.” “they’ll print the suicide thing?” “I dunno.” we talk awhile and then he hangs up. some hangover. some column. I remember when I was a kid, they used to have a song BLUE MONDAY. they played it in Hungary, I believe. and everytime they played BLUE MONDAY somebody took the suicide way. they finally barred the song from being played. but they are playing something from the floor on my radio that sounds just as bad. if you don’t see this column next week it may not be because of subject matter. meanwhile, I doubt if I put Coates or Weinstock out of business.

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it was last Monday a.m. I had worked all Sunday until midnight and then drove to this place with the lights on. I brought in a 6-pack and this tended to get them started. somebody went out and got some more.

"you shoulda seen Bukowski last week," this one guy said. "he was dancing with the ironing board. then he said he was going to screw the ironing board."

"yeah?"

"yeah. then he read us his poems. we had to snatch the book from his hands or he would have read us his poems all night."

I told them there was this virgin-eyed woman sitting there looking at me — woman, hell, girl, girl she was — and it was hard to stop.

"lemme see," I told them, "now this is mid-July and I haven't had a piece of ass this year."

they laughed. they thought it was funny. people who are getting ass always think it is funny when somebody else isn't.

then they talked about the young blond god guy who was now shacking with three chicks at the same time. I warned them that when this kid got to be 33 years old he'd have to go find himself a job. this seemed like a kind of flat and vengeful warning. nothing for me to do but drain the beer can and wait for the bomb to drop.

I took a little piece of paper from somewhere and when nobody was looking I wrote down:

love is a way with some meaning; sex is meaning enough.

soon all the young ones got tired and had to go to sleep. I was left with an old-timer, a man about my age. we are bred to go on all night — drinking, that is. after the beer was gone he found a fifth of whiskey. he was an old newspaper man, now an editor on some big city rag back east. the talk was pleasant — two old dogs agreeing on too much. morning came fast. around 6:15 a.m. I said I had to leave. I decided not to drive my car. the walk in was about 8 blocks. old-timer walked with me down to Hollywood Blvd. by the bowling alley. then an old-fashioned handshake and we parted.

As I got about two blocks from my place, I noticed a woman in a car trying to get it started, trying to get it away from the curbing. she was having her troubles. it would leap forward a few feet, then stall. she would start it immediately in what I sensed to be a rather erratic and panicky fashion. it was a late model car. I stood on the corner and watched her. soon the car stalled right next to me, right where I was standing on the curbing. I looked in. there sat this woman. she had on high heels, long dark stockings, blouse, earrings, wedding ring and panties. no skirt, just these light pink panties. I inhaled the morning air. she had this old woman's face and these young big unwrinkled girl's legs and thighs.

the car jumped forward again, stalled again. I walked on down and stuck my head in the window:

"lady, you'd better park that thing. the police are pretty busy this time of the morning. you might get into trouble."

"all right."

she maneuvered it into the curbing, then climbed out. under the blouse were young girl's breasts too. there she stood in her pink panties and long dark stockings and highheels at 6:25 a.m. on a Los Angeles morning. a 55 year-old face with an 18 year-old body.

"are you sure you're all right?" I said.

"sure I'm all right," she said.

"are you *really* sure?" I asked.

"sure I'm sure," she said. then she turned and walked away from me. and I stood there watching the whirling of the buttocks under that pink tight sheen. it was walking away from me, down the street between rows of houses, and nobody in sight, no police, no humans, not even a bird. just those whirling pink young buttocks walking away from me. I was too high to groan; I just felt the eating and wild sadness of another good thing lost forever. I hadn't said the right words. I hadn't said the right combination of words, I hadn't even tried. I deserved an ironing board, so what the hell, just some nut running around in pink panties at 6 a.m. in the morning.

I stood there watching it walk off. the boys would never believe this one — the one that got away. then, as I watched, she turned around and walked back toward me. she looked pretty good from the front too. in fact, the closer she got the better she looked — throwing out the face. but you had to throw out my face too. the face is the first thing you throw out when the luck gets bad. the remaining decay follows in slower order.

she got right up to me. there still wasn't anybody around. there are times when insanity becomes so real that it isn't insanity anymore. here was pink panties back breathing against me, and not a cruise car anywhere, and nobody anywhere between Venice Italy and Venice California, between the sniffboards of hell and the last vacant lot in Palos Verdes.

"good, you came back," I said.

"I just wanted to see if the back of the car was sticking into the driveway."

then she bent over. I couldn't bear up anymore. I grabbed her arm.

"come on, we're going to my place. it's just around the corner. let's catch a few drinks and get off the street."

she looked at me with that fallen-apart face. I still couldn't place the head upon the body. I was throbbing like a stinking beast. then she said, "o.k., let's go."

so we walked around the corner. I didn't touch her. I offered her a cigarette I found in my shirt pocket. we stood outside a church as I lit it for her. I expected, at any moment, a voice from one of the neighboring houses: "HEY, WOMAN, GET OFF THE STREETS WITH YOUR GODDAMNED PANTIES OR I'M GONNA CALL THE FUZZ!" maybe it paid to live on the outskirts of Hollywood. there were probably three or four guys peeking through the curtains as the wife got breakfast ready, meanwhile giving themselves whiplash handjobs.

we got inside and I sat her down and got out a half-jug of mountain red some hippy had left. we drank quietly. she seemed more sensible than most. she didn't bring out the photos of her family from her purse — the children, I mean. of course, the husband always comes out.

"Frank makes me sick. Frank doesn't want me to have any fun."

“yeh?”

“he keeps me locked up. I’m sick of being locked up. he hid all my skirts, all my dresses. he always does that when I’m drinking. when we’re drinkin’.”

“yeh?”

“he wants to keep me like some kind of slave. do you think a woman ought to be a slave to a man?”

“oh, hell no!”

“so I had stockings and heels and panties and blouse but no skirt and when Frank passed out, I escaped!”

“Frank’s probably a good guy, tho,” I said, “don’t knock Frank too much, you know what I mean?”

this is the old pro’s line. always pretend to be understanding, even when you are not. women never want sensibility, all they want is a kind of emotional vindictiveness toward somebody else they care for too much. women are basically stupid animals but they concentrate so much and entirely upon the male that they often defeat him while he is thinking of other things.

“I think Frank’s a bastard. but aren’t you glad I’m here?”

it sure beat ironing boards. I finished my drink and reached around and grabbed that old face and, keeping the body in mind, I kissed it, tongued it down good, her tongue finally grabbing my round tongue and sucking at it, sucking at it, as I played with those young girl’s nylon legs and mother-miracle breasts. Frank was a good guy, especially when he snored.

we took a breather and had another drink. “what do you do?” she asked.

“I’m an interior decorator,” I said.

“don’t get filthy,” she said.

“hey, you’re pretty sharp.”

“I been to college.”

I didn’t ask her where. the old pro knows how it works.

“you been to college?”

“not too much.”

“you’ve got beautiful hands. you’ve got hands like a woman.”

"I've heard that too much. you say that once more and I'm gonna knock your teeth out."

"what are you, some kind of artist or painter or something. you seem kind of mixed up. and I notice you don't like to look a person in the EYES. I don't like people who CAN'T LOOK ME IN THE EYE. are you a coward?"

"yes. but the eyes are different. I don't like people's eyes."

"I like you."

she reached around and grabbed me in front. I wasn't expecting it; I was ready to walk her back to her car. or worse, just let her walk away alone.

it was good. I mean, her holding me. forgetting the words.

we drank down a couple of tall fast ones and then I worked her toward the bedroom, or she worked me toward there. it didn't matter. there is no time like the first time. I don't care what anybody says. I make her leave on her stockings and high heels. I am a freak. I cannot bear the human being in present state, I must be fooled. the psychiatrists must have a word for it, and I have a word for the psychiatrists.

it is just like riding a bicycle: once you get back into the seat the balance and wonderment is there again.

it was good. after getting through with the bathroom we went out front again and killed the jug. I don't remember going back to bed but I awakened with this 55-year-old face leering at me, really a dementia kind of look. the eyes were insane. I had to laugh. she had worked up my string while I was asleep. the same thing had happened to me once with a plump young negress on Irolo Street.

"go, baby, go!" I told her.

I reached up and in and spread her cheeks wide apart. that 55-year-old face came down and kissed me. it was horrible but the 18-year-old body was tit tight, tilting, rippling; snake of a thing as mad as wallpaper come alive. we made it.

then I really slept. I was awakened by something. I looked up and pink panties had pink panties on again and was working her way into one of my ragged old pair of pants. it was sad —

seeing her ass not properly fitted into my wallowing pants. it was sad and ridiculous and ornery and a tear-hurling jerker, but the old pro narrowed his eyes, pretended to be asleep.

Frankie, here comes your LOVE!

when she can.

I watched her look through an empty cigarette pack, I watched her look down at me — it may seem terrible ego but I sensed that she admired me. fuck that, I had my own troubles, still, I did feel bad as I saw what had given something to me walking out of my bedroom door with a torn ripped lousy pair of my workman’s pants on. but the pros can tell a pre-supposed mechanical future based upon chance vs. the real thing which never shows up — except in the shape of an ironing board. she walked out of the bedroom. I let them go; they let me go. everything is horrible really, and I add to it. they will never let us sleep until we are dead and then they will think up another trick. balls, yes, I almost cried, but then orientated by centuries, Christ’s fuck-up, every sad and ripping thing, stupid, I leaped up and checked my only unripped pants not yet ripped from falling down at the knees while drunk. I checked for wallet, I checked for $$$$$ and finding $7, I figured I had not been robbed. and giving a little ashamed smile in the mirror, I fell back upon the x-love bed and … slept.

“the squirs came to my house.”

“they did?”

“yes.”

“squirrels?”

“squirs!”

“were there many of them?”

“many of them.”

“what happened?”

“they talked to me.”

“they did?”

“yes, they talked to me.”

“what did they say?”

“they asked me if I wanted …”

“what did they say?”

“they asked me if I wanted a fix.”

“what? what did you say?”

“I *said* — ‘they asked me if I wanted a fix.’ ”

“and what did *you* say?”

“I said, ‘no.’ ”

“and what did the squirs say?”

“they said, ‘WELL, ALL RIGHT!’ ”

* * *

“mama saw Bill, mama saw Gene, mama saw Danny.”

“she did?”

“yaeah.”

* * *

“can I touch your thing?”

“no.”

“I got tits. you got tits.”

“that’s right.”

“look! I can make your bellybutton disappear. does it hurt when I make your bellybutton disappear?”

“no, that’s just fat.”

“what’s fat?”

“too much of me where I shouldn’t be.”

“oh.”

* * *

“what time is it?”

“it’s 5:25.”

“what time is it now?”

“it’s still 5:25.”

“now what time is it?”

“listen, time doesn’t change very fast. it’s still 5:25.”

“what time is it NOW?”

“I told you — ‘it’s 5:25.’ ”

“now what time is it?”

“5:25 and 20 seconds.”

“I’m gonna throw you my ball.”

“good.”

* * *

“what are you *doing?*”
“I’m *climbing!*”
“don’t fall! if you fall from there you’re finished!”
“*I* won’t fall!”
“don’t.”
“I won’t! I won’t! look at me *now!*”
“o, jesus!”
“I’m coming down! I’m coming down now!”
“o.k., now you *stay* down there!”
“oh, FARK!”
“what did you say?”
“I said, ‘FARK!’ ”
“that’s what I thought you said.”
“mama saw Nick, mama saw Andy, mama saw Rueben.”
“she did?”
“yaeah!”
“you goin’ to work?”
“yes.”
“but I don’t *like* for you to go to work!”
“I don’t like to go either.”
“then don’t go.”
“it’s the only way I can get money.”
“oh.”
“that’s right.”
“you got your pen?”
“yes.”
“you got your keys?”
“yes.”
“you got your badge?”
“yes.”
“go to work, go to work, go to work, go to work, go to work …”

* * *

“we went to workshop last night.”
“yeah?”

“yeah.”

“what’d the people do?”

“they talked. all the people talked and talked. and talked.”

“and what’d you do?”

“I went to sleep.”

* * *

“where did you get those big, beautiful blue eyes?”

“I made them myself!”

“you made them yourself?”

“yaeah!”

“I see.”

“your eyes are blue.”

“no, they’re green.”

“no, they’re *blue!*”

“well, maybe it’s the light. the light is bad in here.”

“did you make your eyes yourself?”

“I think I had a little help.”

“I made my *own* eyes, and my hands and my nose and my feet and my elbows. all that.”

“sometimes I think you’re right.”

“and your eyes are *blue!*”

“o.k., my eyes are blue.”

* * *

“I *farted!* ha, ha, ha! I *farted*!”

“you did?”

“yaeah!”

“you wanna crap?”

“NO!”

“you ain’t pee-pee’d in hours. is something wrong with you?”

“no. is something wrong with you?”

“I don’t know.”

“why?”

“I don’t know why.”

“what time is it?”

“it’s 6:35.”

“now what time is it?”

"it's still 6:35."

"what time is it now?"

"6:35."

"oh, FARK!"

"what?"

"I said, 'oh, FARK! FARK! FARK! FARK!' "

"listen — go get me a beer."

"o.k"

"mama saw Danny, mama saw Bill, mama saw Gene."

"o.k., let me drink my beer."

she runs over and starts stuffing blocks, paper clips, rubber bands, extension cords, blue chip stamps, envelopes, advertisements and a small statue of Boris Karloff into her purse. I drink my beer.

---

in Philly, I had the end seat and ran errands for sandwiches, so forth. Jim, the early bartender, would let me in at 5:30 a.m. while he was mopping and I'd have free drinks until the crowd came in at 7:00 a.m. I'd close the bar at 2:00 a.m., which didn't give me much time for sleep. but I wasn't doing much those days — sleeping, eating or anything else. the bar was so run down, old, smelled of urine and death, that when a whore came in to make a catch we felt particularly honored. how I paid the rent for my room or what I was thinking about I am not sure. about this time a short story of mine appeared in *PORTFOLIO III*, along with Henry Miller, Lorca, Sartre, many others. the Portfolio sold for $10. a huge thing of separate pages, each printed in different type on colored expensive paper, and drawings mad with exploration. Caresse Crosby the editoress wrote me: "a most unusual and wonderful story. who ARE you?" and I wrote back, "Dear Mrs. Crosby: I don't know who I am. sincerely yours, Charles Bukowski." it was right after that that I quit writing for ten years. but first a night in the rain with *PORTFOLIO*, a very strong wind, the pages flying down the street, people running after them, myself standing drunk watching; a big window washer who always ate six eggs for breakfast put a big foot in the center of one of the pages: “here! hey! I got one!” “fuck it, let it go, let all the pages go!” I told them, and we went back inside. I had won some sort of bet. that was enough.

about 11 a.m. every morning Jim would tell me I had enough, I was 86’d, to go take a walk. I would go around to the back of the bar and lay down in the alley there. I liked to do this because trucks ran up and down the alley and I felt that anytime might be mine. but my luck ran bad. and every day little negro children would poke sticks in my back, and then I’d hear the mother’s voice, “all right now, all right, leave that man alone!” after a while I would get up, go back in and continue drinking. the lime in the alley was the problem. somebody always brushed the lime off of me and made too much of it.

I was sitting there one day when I asked somebody, “how come nobody here ever goes into the bar down the street?” and I was told, “that’s a gangster bar. you go in there, you get killed.” I finished my drink, got up and walked on down.

it was much cleaner in that bar. a lot of big young guys sitting around, kind of sullen. it got very quiet. “I’ll take a scotch and water,” I told the barkeep.

he pretended not to hear me.

I touched up the volume: “bartender, I said I wanted a scotch and water!”

he waited a long time, then turned, came over with the bottle and set me up. I drained it down.

“now I’ll have another one.”

I noticed a young lady sitting alone. she looked lonely. she looked good, she looked good and lonely. I had some money. I don’t remember where I got the money. I took my drink and went down and sat next to her.

“whatya wanna hear on the juke?” I asked.

“anything. anything you like.”

I loaded the thing. I didn’t know who I was but I could load a juke box. she looked good. how could she look so good and sit alone?

"bartender! bartender! 2 more drinks! one for the lady and one for myself!"

I could smell death in the air. and now that I smelled it I wasn't so sure whether it smelled any good or not.

"whatch havin', honey? tell the man!"

we'd been drinking about a half an hour when one of the two big guys sitting down at the end of the bar got up, slowly walked down to me. he stood behind, leaned over. she'd gone to the crapper. "listen, buddy, I wanna TELL you something."

"go ahead. my pleasure."

"that's the boss's girl. keep messing and you're going to get yourself killed."

that's what he said: "killed." it was just like a movie. he went back and sat down. she came out of the crapper, sat down next to me.

"bartender," I said, "two more drinks."

I kept loading the juke and talking. then *I* had to go to the crapper. I went to where it said MEN and I noticed there was a long stairway down. they had the men's crapper down below. how odd. I took the first steps down and then I noticed that I was being followed down by the two big boys who had been at the end of the bar. it was not so much the fear of the thing as it was the strangeness. there was nothing I could do but keep walking on down the steps. I walked up to the urinal, unzipped my fly and started to piss. vaguely drunk, I saw the blackjack coming down. I moved my head just a little and instead of taking it over the ear I caught it straight on the back of my head. the lights went in circles and flashes but it was not too bad. I finished pissing, put it back in and zipped my fly. I turned around. they were standing there waiting for me to drop. "pardon me," I said and then I walked between them and walked up the steps and sat down. I had neglected to wash my hands.

"bartender," I said, "two more drinks."

the blood was coming. I took out my hanky and held it to the back of my head. then the two big boys came up out of the crapper and sat down.

"bartender," I nodded toward them, "two drinks for those gentlemen there."

more juke, more talk. the girl didn't move away from me. I didn't make out most of what she was saying. then I had to piss again. I got up and made for the MEN'S room again. one of the big boys said to the other as I passed, "you can't kill that son of a bitch. he's crazy."

they didn't come down again, but when I came back up I didn't sit by the girl again. I had proved some kind of point and was no longer interested. I drank there the rest of the night and when the bar closed we all went outside and talked and laughed and sang. I had done some drinking with a black-haired kid for the last couple of hours. he came up to me: "listen, we want you in the gang. you've got guts. we need a guy like you."

"thanks, pal. appreciate it but I can't do it. thanks anyhow."

then I walked off. always the old sense of drama.

I hailed a cop car a few blocks down, told them I had been blackjacked and robbed by a couple of sailors. they took me to emergency and I sat under a bright electric light with a doc and a nurse. "now this is gonna hurt," he told me. the needle started working. I couldn't feel a thing. I felt like I had myself and everything under pretty good control. they were putting some kind of bandage on me when I reached out and grabbed the nurse's leg. I squeezed her knee. it felt good to me.

"hey! what the hell's the matter with you?"

"nothing. just joking," I told the doc.

"you want us to run this guy in?" one of the cops asked.

"no, take him home. he's had a rough night."

the cops rode me on in. it was good service. if I had been in L.A. I would have made the tank. when I got to my room I drank a bottle of wine and went to sleep.

I didn't make the 5:30 a.m. opening at the old bar. I sometimes did that. I sometimes stayed in bed all day. about 2 p.m. I heard a couple of women talking outside the window. "I don't know about that new roomer. sometimes he just stays in his room all day with the shades down just listening to his radio. that's all he does."

"I've seen him," said the other, "drunk most of the time, a horrible man."

"I think I'll have to ask him to move," said the first one.

ah, shit, I thought. ah, shit, shit shit shit shit.

I turned Stravinsky off, put on my clothes and walked on down to the bar. I went on in.

"hey, there he is!!!"

"we thought ya got killed!"

"did ya hit that gang bar?"

"yeah."

"tell us about it."

"I'll need a drink first."

"sure, sure."

the scotch and water arrived. I sat down at the end stool. the dirty sunshine around 16th and Fairmount worked its way in. my day had begun.

"the rumors," I began, "about it being a very tough joint are definitely true …" then I told them roughly about what I have told you.

the rest of the story is that I couldn't comb my hair for two months, went back to the gang bar once or twice more, was nicely treated and left Philly not much later looking for more trouble or whatever I was looking for. I found trouble, but the rest of what I was looking for, I haven't found that yet. maybe we find it when we die. maybe we don't. you've got your books of philosophy, your priest, your preacher, your scientist, so don't ask me. and stay out of bars with MEN's crapper downstairs.

* * *

when Henry's mother died it wasn't bad. nice Catholic funeral. the priest waved some smoking sticks and it was all over. the coffin remained closed. Henry went right from that funeral to the racetrack. had a good day. found a light yellow girl there and they went to her apartment. she cooked steaks and they made it. when his father died it was more complicated. they left the coffin open and he had the last look. before that, the old man's girl friend, somebody he'd never met, a Shirley, this Shirley reached into the coffin, moaning and crying and grabbed that dead head and kissed it. they had to pull her off. then when Henry came down the steps this Shirley grabbed him and started kissing him. "oh, you look just like your father!" he got hot as she kissed him and when he shoved her off something was showing through his pants. he hoped the people didn't notice. he made a note to check Shirley out. she wasn't much older than he. he went from the funeral to the track, but no high yellow this time. and he also lost some money. the old man had left his stigma on him.

the lawyer said no will had been left. there was no money but there was a house and a car. Henry wasn't working so he moved right in. and drank. drank with his old girl friend Maggy. he got up about noon and watered the damn lawn. and the flowers. the old man liked flowers. he watered the flowers. he stood there hung over, remembering how the old man hated him because Henry didn't like to work. just drink and lay up with women. now he had the damn house and the car and the old man was down in the dirt. he got to know the neighbors especially the guy on the north. some guy who was manager of a laundry. Harry. this Harry had a yard full of birds. 5,000 dollars full of birds. all kinds. from everywhere. they were strangely colored and strangely shaped and some of them talked one of them kept saying over and over again, "go to hell go to hell" Henry squirted water on the thing but it was no use, the bird said "got a match?" and then it would say "go to hell" five or six times, real fast. the whole yard was full of these wire cages. Harry lived for the birds. Henry lived for the booze, and the gash. maybe he'd try one of those birds. how do you screw a bird?

Maggy was good on the springs but she was Irish-Indian and had one hell of a temper when she drank. once in a while he had to hit her. he got Shirley's phone number and asked to come over. she started to kiss him again, saying he looked just like her father. he let her and kissed back. he didn't make it that night, choosing to wait and make sure. he didn't want to scare her.

Harry came over almost every night with his wife and they drank. Harry talked about the laundry and the birds. the birds hated Harry's wife. Harry's wife crossed her legs real high while talking about how she hated the birds and Henry got something working under his pants. god damned women kept teasing him. then Shirley started coming over and they all drank together. Maggy didn't like Shirley there and Henry kept looking from Shirley to Harry's wife and wondering which one was best. so it all happened the same night. Harry's wife got drunk and let all the birds out. 5,000 dollars worth of birds, and Harry sat in shock, drunk, and then he started screaming and hitting his wife. every time he hit his wife she fell down and Henry peeked up her dress. he saw her panties several times. he started to get hot as hell. Maggy ran outside trying to catch the birds and put them in their cages, but she couldn't seem to catch them. they were running all up and down the street, sitting in trees, standing on roof tops, 5,000 dollars worth of crazy birds, all different shapes and colors, tasting the confusion of freedom. Henry couldn't stand it anymore and grabbed Shirley and took her into the bedroom. he stripped her down and got on top. he was almost too drunk to operate. each time Harry hit his wife, his wife screamed and he gave an extra little thrust. then Maggy came in with a bird, a bird with an orange tuft on its head and an orange tuft on its chest and two orange tufts at the top of the feet. the rest of the bird was gray skin and stupid. he'd cost Harry $300. Maggy hollered, "I caught a bird!" and when she didn't see Henry she went into the bedroom and when she saw what was happening she just sat in a chair with the bird in her lap, watching and screaming, and Harry kept knocking his wife down and she kept screaming, and when the police came in that's the way it was.

two young cops. the cops pulled Henry off, made everybody put on their clothes and took them down to the station. another patrol car came with two other young cops. Maggy got vicious and hit one of the cops and they took her along in one of the patrol cars. the cop drove the car into the hills and they each screwed Maggy in the back seat. they had to handcuff her. the other cop took Henry, Harry, Shirley, Harry's wife down to the station, booked them and jailed them, and the birds ran all up and down the street.

that Sunday the preacher spoke of the "lecherous alcoholics who bring sin and shame to our community." Maggy was the only one who was out of jail, she was very religious. she sat in the front row with her legs crossed high. from the pulpit the preacher could look right up her legs. he could almost see her panties. he started to get something under his pants, the pulpit, luckily, hid this section of him from view. he had to look out the window and keep talking until the thing under his pants went away.

Harry lost his job. Henry sold the house. the preacher made it with Maggy. Shirley married a tv repairman. Harry sat around looking at the empty cages and the birds starved and died in the streets. every time he saw another dead bird in the streets he beat his wife again. Henry gambled and drank away the money in six months.

my name is Henry. Charles is my middle name. when my mother died it wasn't bad. nice catholic funeral. smocking sticks. closed coffin. when my father died it was complicated. they left the coffin open and the old man's girl friend reached into the coffin ... kissed that dead head, and that started the whole thing.

P.S. — you can't screw a bird if you can't catch one.

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the best thing about a modern gas dryer, of course, is the way it treats clothes, and the King kicked me in the ass five times, one two three four five, and there I was in Atlanta, worse off than in New York, broker, crazier, sicker, thinner; no more chance than a 53-year-old whore or a spider in a forest fire, anyway, I walked down the street, it was night and cold, and God didn't care, and the women didn't care, and the dizzy editor didn't care. the spiders didn't care, couldn't sing, didn't know my name, but the cold did and the streets licked my belly cool and empty, haha, the streets knew plenty, and I walked along in a calif. white shirt (old and it was freezing and I knocked on a door, it was around 9 p.m., nearly two thousand years after Christ gave it up, and the door opened and a man without a face stood in the doorway. I said, I need a room, I see you have a sign Room For Rent. and he said, you don't dig me. so I don't want to be bothered.

all I want is a room, I said. it's very cold. I'll pay you. I may not have enough for a week but I just want to get out of the cold. it's not dying that's bad, it's being lost that's bad.

fuck off, he said. The door closed.

I walked along the streets I didn't know the name of. didn't know which way to walk. the sadness was that something was wrong. and I could not formulate it. it hung in my head like a bible. what shit nonsense. what a way to be strung out. no map. no people. no sound, just wasps. stones. walls. wind. my pecker and balls dangling without feeling. I could scream out anything in the street and nobody would hear, nobody would care a tit. not that they should. I wasn't asking for love. but something was very odd. the books never spoke about it. the parents never spoke about it. but the spiders knew. fuck off.

I noticed for the first time that everything OWNED BY ANYBODY had a LOCK on it. everything was locked. a lesson for thieves and bums and madmen, America the beautiful.

then I saw a church. I didn't particularly like churches, especially when they were filled with people. but I didn't figure it to be that way at 9 p.m. I walked up the steps.

hey hey, woman, come see what's left of your man.

I could sit there a while and breathe in the stink, maybe make something out of God, maybe give him a chance. I pulled at the door.

the motherfucker was locked.

I walked on back down the steps.

I kept on walking down the streets, turning corners without reason, kept walking. now it was upon me. the wall. this is what men were afraid of. not only being shut out forever. but also not having a friend. so, no wonder, I thought, this CAN scare the shit out of you. can KILL you. their cheap trick is to get in and hang in. have all kinds of cards in your wallet. money. insurance. automobile. bed. window. toilet. cat. dog. plant. musical instrument. birth certificate. things to get angry about. enemies. backers. flour sacks. toothpicks. undiseased ass. bathtub. camera. mouthwash. o my god, oooo. locks (sink in it, swim in it, rub its back) (everything you have — jam it into you like a couple of fins, rubber wings, spare dick in medicine cabinet.) I walked over a little bridge and then I saw another sign: ROOM FOR RENT. I walked up to the house. knocked. of course I knocked. what do you think I'd do? tap dance in that calif. white shirt with my kool cold ass??

yes, the door opened. old woman, it was too cold to notice if she had a face or not. I guess she did not. I worked on percentages. hell of a mathematician with a cold ass. I rubbed my lips for a while and then spoke.

I see ya gotta room for rent.

at's right. so?

I have reason to believe that I might need a room.

you'll need a buck and a quarter.

for the night?

for the week.

for the week?

at's right.

jesus.

I got up the buck and a quarter. that left me two or three dollars. I looked into the house. jesus. they had a big fire going. five feet wide, three feet tall. I don't mean the house was on fire, I mean they had it going where it counted. a magic fireplace. you could get your life back just staring into that fire. you could gain two pounds without eating, just looking at that fire. there was an old man sitting by the fire. I could see him bathed in the red glory of fire shadow. mother. his mouth hung open. he didn't seem to know where he was. he shook all over. he couldn't stop shaking. the poor devil. the poor old devil. I moved forward a step inside.

fuck off, said the old woman.

whatcha mean? I paid my rent. a whole WEEK'S worth.

at's right. your room's outside. foller me.

the old woman closed the door on that poor devil in there and I followed her down the pathway toward the front. pathway, hell. the whole front yard was dirt. hard cold dirt. I hadn't noticed but there was a cardboard shack in the front yard. my power of observation was always shitty. she pushed open the cardboard door that was hanging on one hinge.

ain't no lock. but nobody's gonna bother ya in there.

I do believe you're right.

she left. I had been right. I had seen her face, she didn't have a face. just flesh hung on bone like crumpled meat on a chicken back.

there wasn't any light. just a cord hanging there from the ceiling. the floor was dirt. but there was newspaper on the floor, kind of ruglike, a bed, no sheets, thin blanket. one. thin blanket. then I found a kerosene lamp! grace! luck! charm!! I had a match and lit the thing. A FLAME APPEARED!

it was a beauty fire, it contained soul, the sides of sunshine mountains, hot streams of smiling fish, warm stockings smelling a bit like toast. I held my hand over the little flame. I had beautiful hands. that one thing I had. I had beautiful hands.

the little flame went out.

I played with the kerosene lamp but being born in the 20th century I didn't know too much about it. but it didn't take me a lifetime to figure that I needed more liquid, fuel, kerosene, whatever you call it.

I pushed open my cardboard door and went out into God's starlit night. I knocked on the door of the house with my beautiful hands.

yeah. the door opened. the old woman stood there. who else? Mickey Rooney? I sneaked an other peek at that poor devil of an old man shaking by the glorious fire. goddamned idiot.

whatzit? the old woman asked from her chickenback head.

well I don't like to bother you, but you know that little kerosene lamp?

yeh.

well, it went out.

yeh?

yeh. I wondered if I could borrow some fuel?

you crazy, boy, thet shit costs MONEY!

she didn't slam the door. she had the ancient Kool. she closed it with a kind of slob unthinking gentility. the training of centuries. nice ancestors. all with chickenback faces. the chickenback faces shall inherit the earth.

I went back to my room (?) and sat on the bed. then a very embarrassing thing happened: even tho I hadn't eaten for a long time, suddenly I had to shit. I had to get up and walk into god's world again and knock on that door again. It wasn't Mickey Rooney this time either.

yeh.

sorry to bother you again. but there's no toilet in my room. is there a toilet anywhere?

right thar! she pointed.

there??

THAR! and lissen …

yeh?

fuck off, boy. you all come here poundin' with your crazy head. yo let all the COL' AIR frum out THERE in HEEYAH!

sorry.

she slammed the thing this time. I could feel the warm air along my ears, between the balls a moment. it was sweet. then I moved toward the structure that served as a crapper.

the toilet didn’t have a lid.

I looked down into the toilet. it seemed to go miles into the earth. and it stank like no toilet ever stank, and that’s some statement. in the moonlight I could see a spider sitting in the middle of its web. a black, fat spider. very knowing. the web was spun across the mouth of the bowl. suddenly all desire to shit left me.

I walked back to my room. I sat on the bed and swung my beautiful hand as close as I could come to that hanging electric wire. I could come closer. I sat there half nutty, full of dried shit, swinging at that wire. then I got up and walked outside. I walked down about a block and stood under a frozen tree. a great frozen tree. with all that dried shit in me. I stood outside a grocery store. there was a fat woman standing in there talking to the grocer. they just stood there under that yellow light, talking. and all that FOOD in there. they didn’t give a damn about the arts, or the short story, or Plato, or even Captain Kidd. they cared for Mickey Rooney. they were dead but in a way they had more sense than me. the insensitive sense of bugs and wild dogs. I wasn’t shit. I couldn’t.

I went back to my room. in the morning I wrote a long letter to my father on the edges of newspapers. I bought an envelope and a stamp and mailed the thing. I told him I was starving and would like bus fare to L.A., and as far as I was concerned the short story could go to hell. look at DeMass, I wrote, he caught the syph and went crazy rowing a rowboat. send money.

I don’t remember if I ever crapped while waiting. but the answer came. I ripped the envelope open. I shook the pages. there were ten or twelve pages of writing, both sides, but no money. the first words were: THE PINCH IS OFF!

… you still owe me TEN DOLLARS which you haven’t PAID BACK TO ME! I work hard for my money. I can’t afford to support you while you write your silly short stories. if you had EVER sold a story or had some TRAINING it would be different, but I read your stories, they’re UGLY. people don’t want to read UGLY things. you ought to write like Mark Twain. he was a great man. he could make people laugh. in all your stories your people kill themselves or go insane or murder somebody. most of life isn't the way you imagine it. get a good job, MAKE something of yourself …

the letter went on and on. I couldn't finish it. all I wanted was money. I shook the pages again. I was too sick to feel the cold. later that day as I was walking along I saw a sign — Help wanted. and sure enough, they needed a man for a track gang somewhere west of Sacramento. I signed on in. I had some trouble there and with the track gang. I was not popular with the boys, the train was one hundred years old with dust. one of the guys got under my seat while I was trying to sleep and blew dust into my face while the others giggled. SHITS! well it was better than Atlanta. finally I got angry and sat up. the guy walked up front and stood with his gang.

that guys nuts, he said. if he comes up here I want you guys to help me.

I didn't go up there. Mark Twain probably could have squeezed some laughs out of the thing, he'd probably be up there drinking out of a bottle with the shits and singing songs. a real man. Sam Clem. I wasn't much, but I was out of Atlanta, not quite dead yet, had beautiful hands and a way to go.

the train ran on.

I don't know if it was those Chinese snails with the little round assholes or if it was the Turk with the purple stickpin or if it was simply that I had to go to bed with her seven or eight or nine or eleven times a week, or something else and something else, and something, but I was once married to a woman, a girl, who was coming into a million dollars, all somebody had to do was die, but there isn't any smog in that part of Texas and they eat well, drink the finest booze and go to the doctor for a scratch or a sneeze. she was a nympho, there was something wrong with her neck, and to get it down close and fast, it was my poems, she thought my poems were the greatest thing since Black, no I mean Blake — Blake. and some of them are. or something else. she kept writing. I didn't know she had a million. I'm just sitting in a room on N. Kingsley Dr., out of the hospital with hemorrhages, stomach and ass, my blood all over the county general hospital, and they telling me after nine pints of blood and nine pints of glucose, "one more drink and you're dead." this is no way to talk to a suicide head. I sat in that room every night surrounded by full and empty beer cans, writing poems, smoking cheap cigars, very white and weak, waiting for the final wall to fall.

meanwhile, the letters. I answered them. after telling me how great my poems were she would enclose a few of her own (not too bad) and then came the same thing: "no man will every marry me. it's my neck. I can't turn it." I kept hearing this: "no man will ever marry me, no man will ever marry me, no man will ever marry me." so I did it while drunk one night: "for Christ's sake I'll marry you! relax." I mailed the letter and forgot about it, but she didn't. she had been sending photos that looked very good, then after I told her the thing, came some horrible looking photos. I looked at these photos and I REALLY got drunk on them. I'd get down on my knees in the center of the rug, I was terrified, I'd say, "I hereby sacrifice myself. if a man can make just one person happy in a lifetime, then his life has been justified." hell, I had to come up with some type of balm. I'd look at one of those photographs and my whole soul would shake and scream and down would go a whole beer can worth.

or maybe it wasn't those Chinese snails with the little round assholes, maybe it was the Art class. where am I?

well, she came out on a bus, mama didn't know, papa didn't know, grandpa didn't know, they were on vacation somewhere and she only had a little change. I met her at the bus station, that is, I sat there drunk waiting for a woman I had never seen to get off a bus, waiting for a woman I had never spoken to, to marry. I was insane. I didn't belong on the streets. the call came. it was her bus. I watched the people swing through the door. and here comes this cute sexy blonde on high heels, all ass and bounce and young, young, 23, and the neck wasn't bad at all. could that be the one? maybe she'd missed her bus? I walked up.

"are you Barbara?" I asked.

"yes," she said, "I guess you're Bukowski?"

"I guess I am. should we go?"

"alright. "

we got into the old car and drove to my place.

"I almost got off the bus and went back."

"I don't blame you."

we got on in and I drank some more but she said she wouldn't go to bed with me until we got married. so we got some sleep and I drove all the way to Vegas and back, we were married. I drove all the way to Vegas and back without rest, and then we got into bed and it was worth it … the FIRST time. she had told me she was a nymph but I hadn't believed it. after the third or fourth round I began to believe it. I knew that I was in trouble. every man believes that he can tame a nymph but it only leads to the grave — for the man.

I quit my job as shipping clerk and we took the bus to Texas. it was then that I found out that she was a millionairess, but the fact didn't particularly elate me. I was always a little crazy. it was a very small town, voted the last town in America by the experts that anyone would care to atom bomb and the experts were right. when I took my little walks between my trips to the bedroom, feeble pale, blase, the people would all stare, of course. I was the city slicker who had hooked the rich girl. I MUST have something, surely. and I did: a very tired cock and a suitcase full of poems. she had an easy job at city hall, a desk and nothing to do, and I would sit by the window in the sun and brush off the flies. papa hated my guts but grandpa seemed to like me but papa had most of the money. I sat and brushed flies. a big cowboy walked in. boots. tall cowboy hat. the works. "Hell Barbara." he said then he looked at me …

"tell me" he asked, "what do you do?"

"DO?"

“yes, JUST WHAT DO YOU DO?”

I let a long time go by. I looked out the window. I brushed a fly away. then I turned to him. he was leaning across the counter, all 6’ 5" of him, red-faced Texas American hero. man.

“Me? oh I just kinda … well, kinda DRIFT around and luck it.”

he ripped his head back around the counter, was around the corner and gone.

“you know who that was?” she asked.

“naw.”

“that was the town bully. he beats people up. he’s my cousin.”

“well he didn’t DO anything, DID he?” I drawled.

she looked at me strangely for the first time. she saw the soiled beast creature. the sensitive-poet thing was just a rose in my mouth at Christmastime. on blue jean day I put on my only suit and walked up and down the town all day. it was like a Hollywood movie. anybody not wearing blue jeans was supposed to be thrown in the lake, but it wasn’t as easy as I make it. I had a few drinks in me as I walked around, but I never saw the lake. the town was mine. the town doctor wanted to go hunting and fishing with me. her relatives came around and stared at me as I flipped beer cans into the wastebasket and told jokes. they mistook my suicide carelessness for bravery. the joke was mine.

but she wanted to go to Los Angeles. she never lived in a big city. I tried to talk her out of it. I liked loafing around the town, but no, she had to go, so gramps wrote us a nice check, and we got back on the bus and rode right on back to L.A. potential millionaires slumming on a greyhound. worse, she insisted that we support ourselves. so I got another job as a shipping clerk, and she sat around wishing SHE could get a job. I’d get drunk every night after work. “good lord,” I would say, “look what I’ve done. I’ve married a real country hick.” this would piss her tremendously. I couldn’t kiss ass to that million bucks, it wasn’t in me. we lived in a house on top of a hill, a small house, rented, and there was long grass in the back yard and the flies hid in the long grass and then came out and they were all over the yard, 40,000 flies, they'd drive me crazy. I'd go out with a big can of spray and kill a thousand a day but they fucked too fast, and so did we. the crazy people up front who had once lived there had put these shelves all around the bed and on these shelves were pots and pots of geraniums. big pots, little pots. all geraniums. when we fucked the bed would shake the walls and the walls would shake the shelves, and then I'd hear it: the slow volcano sound of the shelves giving away and then I'd stop. "no NO, DON'T STOP, OH JESUS, DON'T STOP!" and I'd catch the stroke again and down those shelves would come, down on my back and ass and head and legs and arms, and she'd laugh and scream and MAKE IT. she loved those pots. I'm gonna rip those shelves off the wall," I would tell her. "oh, no," she'd say. "OH, PLEASE PLEASE DON'T!" she said it so nicely that I couldn't. so I'd hammer the shelves back, put the pots back on and we'd wait for next time.

she bought a little black subnormal dog and named him Bruegel. Peter Bruegel was a painter, used to be or something. but after a few days she was no longer interested. she kicked the dog when he got in the way, hard, with that pointed toe, hissing "outa the way, you bastard!" so Bruegel and I would roll on the floor and fight when I drank my beer. that's all he could do — fight, and his teeth were better than mine. somehow I sensed the million going, and I didn't care.

she bought us a new car, a '57 Plymouth which I am still driving, and I told her she could get on with the county. she took an exam and went to work for the Sheriff's Dept. I told her I had been fired from my job as shipping clerk and I used to wash the car everyday and then go down and pick her up after work. one day as we were driving off, all these kids in flowered shirts, t-shirts, pasty-faced, slump-shouldered, with silly grins and high-school strides came out of her building.

"who are those punks?" I asked her.

"those are police officers," she said in her haughty little bitch tone.

"ah, come on! they look like subnormals! those aren't cops! what? come on, THOSE aren't cops!"

"those are police officers and they are all VERY nice fellows."

"AH SHIT!" I said.

she was very angry. we only fucked once that night. the next day it was something else.

"there goes José," she said, "he's a Spaniard."

"a Spaniard?"

"yes, he was born in Spain."

"half the Mexicans I have worked with in factories have claimed they were born in Spain. it's an act; Spain is the father, the ace-bullfighter, the Big Dream of old."

"José was born in Spain, I know he was."

"how do you know?"

"he told me."

"AH, SHIT!"

then at night she decided to go to Art Class. she painted all the time. she was the genius of her town. maybe her state. maybe not.

"I'll go to class with you," I told her.

"YOU? what FOR?"

"so you'll have somebody to drink coffee with on your coffee breaks, and I can drive you back and forth to class."

"well, all right."

we got in the same class and after three or four sessions she began to get very angry, ripping up paper and throwing it on the floor. I just sat there and tried not to watch her. they were all very busy, immersed, yet tittering as if it were a big joke or as if they were ashamed to paint.

the Art instructor came back. "listen, Bukowski, you are supposed to paint something. why are you just sitting here looking at the paper?"

"I forgot to buy brushes."

"very well. I will lend you a brush, Mr. Bukowski, but please return it at the end of class."

"yeah."

"now, you paint that bowl with the flowers sticking out of it."

I decided to get it done with. I worked fast and finished, but everybody else was still at it, holding their fingers in the air, testing for shadow or distance or some damn thing. I walked out and got a coffee, smoked a cigarette. when I walked back in there was a big crowd around my desk. a blonde with nothing but breasts (well, you know) turned to me and put those breasts up against me and said, "ah, you've painted BEFORE, haven't you?" "no, this is my first thing." she wiggled the breasts and drilled them into me, "ah, you're KIDDING!" "ummmmmmm," was all I could say.

the prof took the painting and hung it up front. "now THIS is what I WANT!" he said, "see the FEELING, THE FLOW, THE NATURALNESS!"

oh lord, I thought.

she got up angry and took her stuff into the tiny room where they cut paper and went in there and tore up paper and threw paint around. she even tore down a collage some poor idiot had created.

"mr. Bukowski," the prof came up to me, "is that woman your … wife?"

"ah yes."

"well, we don't tolerate these prima donnas around here. you might as well tell her. and could we use your work in the Art Show?"

"sure."

"ah, thank you, thank you, thank you!"

the prof was crazy. everything I did he wanted for the Art Show. I didn't even know how to mix paints. I'd failed to make a color wheel. I'd mixed purple with orange, brown with black, white with black, anywhere the brush fell. most of the stuff looked like a huge splotch of smeared dogshit but the prof thought I was … the cockprint of God. well. she quit class. so I quit class and left the paintings there.

then she started coming home from work and telling me what a gentleman the Turk was. "a purple stickpin, he wears a purple stickpin, and today he kissed me on the forehead, ever so lightly and said I was BEAUTIFUL."

"listen, sweetheart, you've got to learn, these things go on all the time in the offices of America. sometimes something happens. but most of the time nothing happens. most of these guys jack off in the closet and see too many Charles Boyer movies. the guys who are really getting it are very quiet about it, not out front. I'll give you a hundred-to-one your boy has seen too many movies. squeeze his balls and he'll run."

"at LEAST, he's a GENTLEMAN! and he's SO tired! I'm sorry for him."

"tired from WHAT? working for the L.A. County?"

"he owns a drive-in movie and operates it at night. he doesn't get his rest."

"well, I'm a pig's ass!" I said.

"you sure are," she said sweetly. but that night the pots fell twice more.

then came the night of the Chinese snail dinner. or they might have been Japanese snails. anyhow, I went to the market and for the first time I saw this special rack. I bought the whole rack: tiny octopi, snails, snakes, lizards, slugs, bugs, grasshoppers … I cooked the snails first. put them on the table.

"I cooked them in butter," I told her. "jam 'em in your craw. this is what the poor shits eat, by the way," I asked, jamming two or three snails into my mouth, "how was old Purple Stickpin today?"

"they taste like rubber …"

"rubber, slubber … EAT 'em!"

"they have those tiny assholes … I see their tiny assholes … oh …"

"everything you eat has an asshole. you have an asshole, I have an asshole, we all have assholes. Purple Stickpin has an asshole …"

"oooooh …"

she got up from the table and ran to the bathroom and started heaving.

"those tiny assholes … ooooh …"

I laughed, blubber slubber and jammed the tiny assholes into my mouth and drained them down with beer and laughed.

I wasn't too surprised when one morning a couple of days later somebody knocked on my door, her door, and served me with a divorce summons.

"baby, what's this?" I showed her the paper. "don't you love me, baby?"

she began to cry. she cried and cried and cried.

"there, there, don't you worry, maybe Purple Stickpin will be the guy. I don't think he jacks off in the closet. he might well be the one."

"ooooooh, ooooooh, ooooooh."

"he probably jacks off in the bathtub."

"oh, you rotten shit!"

she stopped crying. then we brought the flowerpots down for one last good time. she went to the bathroom and started humming and singing, getting ready for work. that night I helped her find a new place and pack, and moved her out. she said she didn't want to stay in the old place, it would break her heart. rotten cunt. I got a paper on the way back and opened it to the classified ads looking for: shipping clerk, stockboy, janitor, warehouse man, aide to the crippled, telephone book deliveryman. then I threw the paper down, went out and got a fifth and drank my million goodbye. I saw her once or twice — casually, no flowerpots — and she said she only made it once with Purple Stickpin and then quit her job. she said she was going to begin painting and writing "seriously."

later she went to Alaska and married an Eskimo, a Japanese fisherman, and my joke is when drunk, to now and then tell somebody, "I once lost a million dollars to a Japanese fisherman."

"oh, come on now, you never HAD a million dollars."

and I guess they were right: I never did have it.

I get a letter once or twice a year, a long letter, one usually before Christmas. "write," she says. there are now two or three children with Eskimo names. and she says she has written a book, it is on the shelves up there, it is a children's book but she is "proud" and she is now going to write a "serious" novel about "character disintegration!" she is going to write TWO NOVELS ABOUT CHARACTER DISINTEGRATION. ah, I think, one is about me. and the other is about the Eskimo, who is, by now, fucking up. or fucking out. or maybe the other is about Purple Stickpin?

maybe I should have followed up that girl with tits in Art Class. but it's hard to please a woman. and she might not have liked the tiny assholes either. but you ought to try the octopi. like baby fingers in melted butter. the spiders of the sea, dirty rats. and while you are sucking at those fingers you get revenge, kiss off a million, knock off a beer, and to hell with the light co., Fuller Brush, tape machines and the underbelly of Texas and her crazy women with nicks that won't turn who cry and fuck you, leave you, write homey letters every Christmas, even tho you are now a stranger, won't let you forget, Bruegel, the flies, the '57 Plymouth outside your window, the waste and the terror, the sadness and the failure, the stage play the horseplay, all our lives, falling down, getting up, pretending it's ok, grinning, sobbing, we wipe our tiny assholes, and the other kind.

To Funky Bukowski

I call you funky Bukowski, because I think you're nasty

don't get mad, cause, I like your nasty — it makes me hot to read about; you looking up ladies dresses or jacking-off in elevators or sniffing drawers — to get high; now I know you're wondering who this is writing you. Well I'll tell you who I am, nice and clear

so there'll be no mistake

in pointing me out. I'm the clean

smooth cunt you think about
when you fuck those discharging wrinkled
pussies, I'm the lady who sits
down the row from you in the all night
movies, and watches you cum and cum
in your jacket pocket, and I slowly hike
my skirt up, hoping you'll look at my thighs
as you — get up to go wipe your hands, I call
it long dis-stance sex. but I love it
I love the feel of your heavy breathing on the
back of my neck as you try to poke your
fingers in my asshole through the crack
in the seat; now you're thinking, (it sounds
nice, but I don't remember you.) but from
now on you will/think of me/and after all —
that's what I wanted any way. my nasty man —

unsigned

the public takes from a writer, or a writing, what it needs and lets the remainder go. but what they take is usually what they need least and what they let go is what they need most. however, all this allows me to execute my little holy turns unmolested if they understood these, then there wouldn't be any more creators, we'd all be in the same pot of shit. as it is now, I am in my pot of shit and they are in theirs, and I think mine stinks better.

sex is interesting but not totally important. I mean, it's not even as important (physically) as excretion. a man can go 70 years without a piece of ass but he can die in a week without a bowel movement.

here in the United States, especially, sex is inflated far beyond its simplest importance. a woman with a sexy body immediately turns it into a weapon for MATERIAL advancement. and I am not speaking of the whorehouse whore, I am speaking of your mother and your sister and your wife and your daughter. and the American male is the sucker (bad term, yes) who perpetuates the extremism of the hoax. but the American male has had his brains beaten out by the American formal education and the American prenumbed parent and the American monster Advertising long before he was twelve years old. he is ready and the female is ready to make him beg and get up the $$$. this is why a professional whore with a towel under the springs is so hated by her counterfemale professional whore (the near remainder of womanhood; there are a FEW good women, thank the Lord!) and the law. the openly professional whore poses a breakdown threat to the whole American society of Strive and Hustle all the way to the grave. she devaluates the pussy.

yes, sex has gone completely beyond its value. notice sometime, in your newspaper (you ain't gonna find it here in "Open City" except off laughs), a group of entrants in bathing suits posing for a photo for some beauty contest or other, for the queen of this or that. see those legs, those long flanks, the breasts — some magic there, indeed. and these girlies know this, plus the bargaining price attached. THEN look at the eight or ten faces, smiling. the smiles are not smiling, they are carved onto paper faces, onto carbons of death. the noses and ears and mouths and chins are properly shaped within our concepts, but the faces are ugly beyond all essence of brutality. there is no thought there, no force, no density. no kindness … nothing, nothing. flat murdered flares of skin. eyeless. but show these faces of horror to the average American male and he will say, “yeah, real CLASS broads. I can’t rate those.”

you see these same beauty contest winners years later, grown old, in supermarkets; they are fussy, insane, bitter, demeaned — they put their stock in something unlasting, they were tricked; beware the sharp knives of their shopping carts — they are the madwomen of the Universe.

so, to some writers, including the gloriously impertinent Bukowski, sex is obviously the tragicomedy. I don’t write about it as an instrument of obsession. I write about it as a stage play laugh where you have to cry about it, a bit, between acts. Giovanni Boccaccio wrote it much better. he had the distance and the style. I am still too near the target to effect total grace. people simply think I’m dirty. if you haven’t read Boccaccio, do. you might begin with “The Decameron.”

yet, I still have a little distance and after 2,000 pieces of ass, most of them not very good, I am still able to laugh at myself and my trap.

I remember once in the cellar of a lady’s dress shop, I was a flunky shipping clerk, and my boss (the foreman, that is) was a fairly young but little balding snip and this little snip was being drafted into World War II. was he worried about being killed? the meaning of war? the non-meaning of war? what it meant to be split into pieces by a lob of mortar?

he confided in me. he thought I was a nice guy. we were both alone in this big basement room — the other packers were sweating a floor above — were down in the sub-basement, dank and dusty there, and we were scrambling along over the tops of cardboard packing cases that stood six feet high oblong. we were looking for a number, a certain type of cloth or dress to be shipped out, and there were only three or four small electric light bulbs to light the whole basement area, and there we were leaping along like spider-monkeys on our fours, leaping from case to case, peering for some magic number, a special type of cloth to be cut into a lady's dress.

oh god, mercy, I thought, what a hell of a way to make a living, what a hell of a way to survive and die just for pennies. surely suicide was the kindest out?

and the little snip would holler at me, "SEEN THE NUMBER YET?"

and I'd say, "naw." barely getting the word out.

shit, I wasn't even looking. what interest did I have in finding the number? every now and then when he would look back, I would leap from the top of one cardboard carton to another. finally he came leaping back toward me, sat on the carton next to mine and lit a cigarette.

"Bukowski, you're a nice guy."

I didn't answer.

"I'm being drafted. this is my last week here."

all during my short employee-tenure there I had done everything I could to keep from slugging the guy and now he was giving me some wearisome confessional.

"you know what worries me about the Army?" he asked.

"no."

"I won't be able to fuck my wife. now most of these guys don't get any. but I can tell by looking at you that you're getting some …"

(I wasn't getting any.)

"… so I tell my wife this say, 'honey, what I am going to do, I won't be able to fuck you.' and you know what she says?"

"she says, 'for Christ's sake, go into the army and be a man. I'll be here when you get back,' but damn, I'm going to miss it; I'm going to miss it; most of these guys don't know what it is but you and I know what it is, yeah."

(I didn't tell him that somebody would fuck his wife for him while he was gone. and that if he didn't come back, she would adjust to the next position of Body for Sale with whatever she had left.) he was a little mole of a man who would suffer a two-bit job or the suicide charge of the BANZAI! Jap, or even worse, the deter mined checkboard advance of the beaten, Snow-Hun, coming through the falling whiteness looking for HIS number. the Snow-Hun, bitter and trained and brave, a last shot of madness in the Bulge, looking for his number. ah, the mole! he would SUFFER these, almost like an itch or a yawn or a bit of the flu, just to remain on in, on the right side of the social structure, hoping to luck it through so he might come back to fuck his wife.

there's your sex: it concerns assholes and the entire movements of armies. men are decorated for Valor who only have pussies for brains. but bravery? the bravery of an imbecile hardly counts; it's the thinking man's bravery that counts — it takes a bit of work and a lucky stomach.

and you mix sex in with the rest of us and you've got something very difficult, and the more you study it the less you know. one theory replaces another, and in almost every case, the insult is to the human being. maybe it should be. with all our potential, the fiercest growth is downward.

the sex thing even confuses the great Bukowski. I remember one night sitting in a bar just west of one of those downtown tunnels. at the time, I lived in a room just around the corner in a place halfway up the hill. anyhow, I am sitting there, well on the way, and I g.d. figure I am young and tough and can take anybody who wants trouble. I even want people who want trouble, but still life is just new enough to me, say at 22, 23, that I am some kind of asshole Romantic; I find life vaguely interesting instead of actually terrifying. so the night wears on a little and then I look around — I am mixing drinks — I mean buying straight shots, wine, beer — I am trying to knock myself out but nothing works and God has not arrived.

then I kind of look around and here is a very sad beautiful type of little girl (around seventeen) sitting next to me. she has this long blonde hair (I've always been soft on these longhair types, I mean where the hair goes down to the asshole and you keep grabbing hair, the strands of it as you work, and it makes it rather symphonic instead of the same old drag) and she's quiet, very quiet, almost holy, ah, but she's a WHORE, and next to her is the protector, the madam-lesbian, and they'd rather NOT, you know, but they need the money. I engaged them in conversation rather out of my left brain lobe. I'm sure it was senseless to them but that didn't matter, you know: they needed the $$$. I ordered the drinks.

the bartender set them down in front of the seventeen year old like she was thirty five. where was the law? thank god, the law was bypassed for some reason or another.

for each drink they drank I drank three. this encouraged them. I was the "mark." I had the chalkmarked "X" on my back. what they damn sure didn't know was that I had won drinking contests all through the city with some of the toughest drinkers of the time, free booze and pick up the chips. I don't know why it took so much to knock me out. it might have been my extreme anger or sorrow, or it might have been a part of the brain-soul missing. probably both are true.

anyhow, not to bore you with these damn side remarks, forgive me; we finally went up the hill toward my room, together.

I have forgotten to tell you that the madam-lesbian was a fat hunk of human shit with cardboard eyes and senseless hunks of haunch, plus one of her hands was missing and instead of a hand there was this very very SHINY and thick interesting steel CLAW.

so we went up the hill.

then we got into my room and I looked at them both. my pure and beautiful slim and magic little girl glorious fuck with the hair dangling down to the asshole, and next to her the tragedy of the ages: slime and horror, the machine gone wrong, frogs tortured by little boys and head-on car collisions and the spider taking in the ball-less buzzing fly and the landscape brain of Primo Carnera going down under the dull playboy guns of cocksure Maxie Baer — new heavyweight champ of America — I, I rushed at the Tragedy of the Ages — that fat slob of accumulated shit.

I grabbed her and tried to throw her onto my dirty bed but she was too strong and too sober for me. with one arm she worked me free. she shoved me off with her pure lesbian hatred, and then getting me off, she began SWINGING THAT ARM WITH THAT BIG INTERESTING SHINY STEEL CLAW.

I could not as one man, change the course of sexual history, I just didn't have it.

she swung that CLAW in wide and wonderful swift arcs and by the time I had ducked and raised my head to see where the CLAW was at, here it came again. but, during iron claw's whole attempt to murder me, I, being note taker by instinct, had taken very quick and timed glance at the beautiful and holy and young whore and I do think that of the three of us that she did suffer the most. I could see it in her face. truly, she could not fathom why I wanted that ugly accumulation of all things zero and dead as compared to what she had. but I guess mama lesbian knew the answer, for each time she swung that thing at me, she'd turn to her little one and say "this guy's crazy, this guy's crazy, this guy's crazy." — and under one of her "this guy's crazy" iron claw swings I swung out and free and under to the other side of the room near the door. I pointed at the dresser and shouted, "THE MONEY'S IN THE TOP DRAWER!" and mama L., being a true shit, was taken in and turned. by the time she turned around I was nearly up to the top of the hill, up at Bunker Hill heaven, looking around and breathing heavy, checking for my parts, then wondering where the nearest liquor store was.

when I came back with my bottle, the door was still open, but they were gone. I bolted the door, sat down and poured a quiet drink. to sex and madness. then I had another, went to bed alone and let the world go by.

to my nasty man
I’ve wrote you once
before

or was it three

times

I breathe in your ear licking my tongue out
so you'd feel what I meant and you felt,
yeh, baby, you felt good.
you'd say, "Hey! what are you doing, who are you???"
I could hear you getting a glass pouring a big one I bet.
"you sound good to me, tell me your name."
you said, then … I would breathe deep and hard, and you began to speak softer to me, you'd whisper to me, then breathe

with me
I heard your zipper
slowly being pulled down

I caught my breath then, “Flip … Flap, Plook,”

“I love you.” you said, “Slip, Slap.”

as you put down the glass, to use both hands, “Flop, Flap, Blipp”

Faster and Faster, and I knew you had your hands on it, it’s dry now but not for long.

AHHHHH-oh-AHHHHH, I hissed

“Slip, Flap.”

he’s doing it — I thought, I closed my eyes ugh — AHHHHHH-OHOO!!!

“Flip-Flip” getting wet, “Slap, Bloop, Flap.”

very very slippery; “AHHH-OHO-YEAAA!”

“that’s it baby.” you said. “Flip, Flap.”

“say something!” you screamed.

OOOOOOH — GOOD GOD I cried, then my knees felt something — stroke of love juice — shot up my slender thighs — I slammed my legs shut, I hung up.

unsigned

Dear Unsigned:

oh my god, baby, I can hardly wait!

yours truly,

Charles Bukowski ________

it all begins and ends with the mailbox, and when they find a way to remove mailboxes, much of our suffering will end. right now our only hope is in the hydrogen bomb, and dispirited as I may seem, this does not quite seem the proper remedy.

well, the mailbox: after a sleepless night I walked out onto my rented porch, and looked at that great gut-gray mindless thing with a subnormal spider hung there below it sucking the last love chance out of a butterfly. well, so I stand, thinking, ah, maybe the Pulitzer Prize or a grant from the humanities or my copy of “Turf Digest” so I reach in and there it is, one letter in the mailbox, I know the writing, I know the address, I know the mood, the form of each hand written letter, the female insane slanting crossfire of bungled image two-bit soul: dear bongo: I watered the plants today. my plants are dying. how are you? it will soon be christmas. my friend Lana teaches poetry at the in insane asylum. they have a magazine. could you submit something of yours. must go now. I'm sure they would be happy to print something of yours. the children will be home soon. saw your last poem in Oct. issue of the *BLUE STARDUST JACKOFF*. it was lovely. you are the world's greatest living writer. the children are coming home soon must go. must go.

Love,
meggy

meggy keeps on writing these letters. I have never met meggy, as I told you, but she does send photos, and she looks like a big healthy fuck, and she has also sent poems, her poems, and they are a bit on the comfortable side, tho they speak of agony and death and eternity and the sea, it's a great big yawning comfortable thing — almost as if one stuck in a pin in order to scream and then could not scream, just another female disappointment in the aging process and in her lessening husband; just another female dulled by her OWN easy sellout from the beginning and now piddling with the vacuum cleaner days and little troubles with junior who is also rapidly working towards zero times nothing.

it is their own minds that women ingest into a man's work — either willfully misreading the intent or either sensing tired prey upon the bloody cross. either way they screw it up good. whether they want to or have to, it doesn't matter to the victim. which is the man, of course.

if meggy had lived close enough I could have ended the whole torture easily enough, herself at my place breathing in the fine lilting flare of my poets eyes, the pantherpiss stride, pants torn at the knees with 2:30 a.m. falls — comparing me with, say, Stephen Spender — I would turn and say in not very articulate English: "baby, in a couple of minutes I'm going to rip off your goddamned panties and show you some turkey neck you'll remember all the way to the graveside. I have a vast and curved penis, like a sickle, and many a gutted pussy has gasped come upon my callous and roach-smeared rug. first let me finish this drink."

then you drink down a tall water glass of straight whiskey, smash the glass against the wall, muttering "Villon ate fried titty for breakfast," pause to light a cigarette and when you turn your problems will be solved — it will leave out the front door. if it remains it deserves what it gets. and so do you.

but meggy lives in a state quite far north of here and so that was out. but I answered the letters for several years thinking that she might get close enough to fuck or scare off some day.

finally the seemingly endless hard-on wore off. the letters kept coming but I simply didn't answer them. her letters were as usual, excellently dull and pointedly depressing, but the fact that I had decided not to answer them DID take some of the poison out of them. it was a great plan, a plan that a simple mind like mine would need all that time to plot out — don't answer the letters and you are free.

there was a pause in the mail. I felt that it was over; I had used the last trick of the kind: be cruel to the cruel, be stupid to the stupid. the cruel and the stupid were the same: there was nothing you could do to them; there were only things they could, and would do to you. I had defeated a problem of the centuries; the elimination of the unwanted. it doesn't take a number of men and women to smother and dismember the life of any individual, it only takes one. and it usually is one. even when armies face armies, ants face ants, any way you want to work it.

I began to see things again with my EYES. I noticed a sign over a cleaning shop, some joker had placed; TIME WOUNDS ALL HEELS. I never would have seen the sign before. I began, at last, to be freer. I saw almost everything. I saw the strange and crazy things I used to notice, upside down, romantic, explosive things that seemed to give chance to no chance. that seemed to show magic forces where before there was nothing.

KILLS INVENTOR

> Monterey, Nov. 18 (UPI)
>
> A Carmel Valley man has been killed by a device he invented to unwrinkle prunes.

that's all the dispatch said. perfect. I was alive again. then one morning I went out to the mailbox. a letter. along with the gas bills, threats from the dentist. a letter from an ex-wife I could hardly remember, and an ad for a poetry reading of talentless poets.

dear bongo:

this is the LAST letter. god damn you to hell. you are not the ONLY one who has abandoned me. I'll see all of you who have abandoned me — I'LL SEE ALL OF YOU IN THE GRAVE FIRST!

meggy

my grandmother used to talk that way to me and she never gave me any pussy either.

well a couple of days later, shaking of the hangover of joy. I went to the mailbox. some letters. I opened them. the first dear mr. b: your application for an individual grant from the National Endowment for the Arts has been considered by the National Council on the Arts. with the advice of an independent panel of literary experts, we regret to inform you …

another letter:

hello bongo:

crouched in the corner of this evil smelling hotel room the only thing that breaks the silence is the click of wine bottles on teeth … I'm rheumy, legs covered w/sores; 51 aces turned up blank, 52nd. in the mail … I covered all corners y'know? and it turned out to be a bloody dog damn circle … fired from lemon groves for being gone too long. (hog farm wedding: 4 days) and pickin' too little. came back to s.f. & missed sure xmas job at post office by one day … sit in the corner of this room lites out waitin' for peace and gladness baptist church to turn in its red neon sign so I can start crying … dog in the street gets runned over by a runaway bus … wish I was that dog, cause I don't know how to do it myself … even that requires decisions … where's them cigarettes … walked out of the mission this morning. unnameable food attacking my hog-maw guts. looked around on market street at all them pretty girls hair like clear winter san frisco sunshine … well. what the hell.

M.

and another:

dear bongo:

forgive me. I get this way. try to love me a little. I got a new sprinkle today. the other was rusty. I enclose a poem from "Poetry Chicago." I thought … of myself … as I read it. must go now. the children are on the way home.

love me,
meggy

the enclosed poem is carefully typed. not an error. doublespaced the words she typed are engraved into the paper with the same pressure the same measured … love. — it's a horrible poem.

it speaks of the wind and some undersized comfortable tragedy. it is 18th century. bad 18th century.

but still I do not answer. I go to my garbage job. they know me down there. they are my superiors. I like it. they allow me to flow. they don't know T. S. Eliot from Lawrence of Arabia. I am drunk for two or three days. still make the job.

I have a special ring-system that must work before I will pick up my phone. I am not a snob; it is simply that I am not interested with what most people have to say, or what they want to do — mostly with my time. but one night, steadying myself to make it on in to the garbage job, the phone rang. since I was leaving in a couple of minutes I figured there wasn't much they could do with me. it wasn't the signal but I picked up the phone anyway.

"bongo?"

"eh? yeh?"

"this is … meggy."

"oh, hello, meggy."

"listen I don't mean to impose myself. I just get haywire."

"oh yeh. we all do."

"just don't HATE my letters."

"well, meggy, it's like this. I really don't hate your letters. they are really so comfortable that — "

"oh I'm SO glad!"

she hadn't let me finish. I had meant to say that her letters were so comfortable that they terrified me with their vacuum cleaner yawns. but she never let me finish.

"I'm really glad."

"yeh," I said.

"but you haven't sent any poems for our class at the institution."

"I am trying to find some that will fit."

"I'm sure that any of yours will do."

"the torturer is sometimes good at the innuendo."

"what do you mean?"

"forget it."

"bongo, aren't you writing anymore? I remember when you used to make every issue of *Blue Stardust*. Lilly writes that you haven't submitted in years. have you forgotten the 'littles?' "

"I'll never forget those motherfuckers."

"you're funny. but I mean, don't you SUBMIT your WORK anymore?"

"well, there's *Evergreen*."

"you mean, they've ACCEPTED YOU?"

"once or twice. but, *Evergreen* isn't a little magazine, please remember that. write Lilly. tell her I have deserted from the barricades."

"oh bongo, I knew from the first moment I read your lines that you were destined. I still have your first collection, 'Christ Creeps Backwards.' Oh, bongo, bongo."

I got rid of her telling her I had to go collect some garbage. meanwhile I was thinking, now who would WANT to unwrinkle a prune? they surely don't taste good: perhaps a little like dried chilled turds. their only charm is the WRINKLES THEMSELVES, the cold wrinkles and that slippery iced seed that slips from your tongue onto the plate like a living thing itself.

I went over and opened a beer. decided that I couldn't make work that day. it was good to sit in a chair. tilt the bottle up and let everything go to hell. I knew one who claimed she slept with Pound at St. Liz. I got well rid of her after a lengthy correspondence by foolishly insisting that I also knew how to write and that I found the "Cantos" dull.

I had meggy's letters everywhere. there was an old one on the floor near the typewriter. I got up walked over and picked it up:

dear bongo, all my poems are coming back. well, if they don't know good poetry, that's their fault. sometimes I still read your first volume *CHRIST CREEPS BACKWARDS*. and all your other volumes. so long as I know that I can bear up under ALL their terrible stupidity. the children will be home soon.

love me
meggy

p.s. — my husband jokes with me — "bongo hasn't written in a long time. what has happened to bongo?"

I empty the beer bottle. throw it into the wastebasket.

I could see it now, her husband mounting her thrice a week. her hair like a fan on the pillow. like the sex writers like to say. she really imagines that he is bongo. he imagines that he is bongo.

"oh bongo! bongo!" she says.

"coming, mother." he says.

I open another beer and walk to the window. it is the usual dark sterile senseless Los Angeles day. I am still alive, in a sense. it has been a long time since the first volume of poems; it has been a long time since the Watts riots. we have wasted ourselves. John Bryan wants a column. I could tell him about meggy. but the meggy story is unfinished. she will be in my mailbox tomorrow morning. if I were in the movies I could handle it: "look little john, there's this broad see? she's bugging me, see? you know what to do. don't mess it up. give her that fourteen inch dick and get her off my back, see? you'll find her. she's in this room with a vacuum cleaner lookin' sad eyed, see? room full of poetry magazines, she's unhappy. she thinks she's been crucified by life but she really don't know what life is, see? put her straight: give her the fourteen."

"aw right."

"and little john …"

"yeh."

"don't make any stops on the way."

"aw right."

I go back and sit down, suck up my beer. I ought to get drunk, fly up there, appear at her door in rags, drunk, beating on the wood, buttons all across my torn shirt: "IMPEACH JOHNSON." "STOP THE WAR." "UN-BURY TOM MIX." anything.

but nothing will work. I just have to sit and wait. the "Humanities" are out. I have stopped writing poems for *Evergreen*. there will be only one thing in that box: dear bongo blah blah blah blah blah blah blah. I have watered the pots. the children are coming home soon. blah blah blah.

love me
meggy

did this ever happen to Balzac or Shakespeare or Cervantes? I hope not. man's worse invention has three heads: the mailbox the mailman, and the letter-writer. I have a blue coffee can on the shelf full of unanswered letters. I have a large paper box in the closet full of unanswered letters. when do these people get drunk, fuck, earn money, sleep, bathe, crap, eat, cut their toenails? and meggy leads the pack: love me, love me, love me.

a fourteen inch dick might get me out, or in, or make it worse. with what I have, there has been trouble enough already.

---

in those days there was usually somebody in my room whether I was there or not. you usually didn't know who was going to be there or who wasn't. it was just somebody. a big human and not too holy. there was always a party. party meaning: an extension of luck and the ways: two dollars and some change bought a roomful of talk and electric light sound for six or seven.

all right, one night, lights all out, I awakened in bed drunk, but clear, you know, suddenly clear the unclean walls. the no purpose at all, the sadness the everything. and I got up on one elbow and looked around and everybody seemed gone. just those empty wine bottles on their moonlit sides. gross tough morning waiting, and I looked around me in the bed and there's this human form. some cunt had decided to stay with me — that was love, that was bravery. shit, who could really stand me? anyone who could stand me had a lot of forgiveness of soul. I just had to REWARD this sweet, little dear deer for having the guts and insight and courage to stay with me.

what better reward than to fuck her in the ass?

I had run into a strange breed of woman, a strange line of women and none of them had wanted it in the tail and so I had never done it that way and it was working on my mind. it used to be all I could talk about when I got drunk. I'd say to some woman, "I'm gonna get you in the ass, and I'm gonna get your mama in the ass, and I'm gonna get your daughter in the ass." and the answer would always be, "oh no you don't!" they'd do anything and everything but that. maybe it was just the time and the weather, or just mathematical, because much later after that there was nothing but women sitting around and saying, "Bukowski, why don't you screw me up the stovepipe? I've got a big round soft butt." and I'd answer, "you sure have, dearie, but I'd rather not."

but then in those days, I'd just never given it that way, and I was feeling a little crazy, as usual, and I had this strange idea that a good fuck in THEIR ass would solve a lot of MY spiritual and mental problems.

I found the last glass of wine mixed with cigar ashes and sadness. then I got back into bed, winked at the moon and slipped my little weenie into that bulging snoring immaculate backside. a sneak thief does not precious the prize so much as the stealing. I loved both. my little stick raised to the top of its insanity. my god, ugly and perfect. vengeance, somehow, upon all manner of things, upon old icecream men with mad pigeon eyes, upon my dead mother living and smearing cream across her impartial and tasteless iron face.

she's still asleep, I thought. which made it better. it's probably Mitzi. maybe Betty. what's the difference? my victory — sad, unemployed and starving cock slipping into doorways of things forever forbidden! GLORIOUS! I felt very dramatic really — the top side of DRAMA, like Jesse James catching the slug, like Christ at the cross under klieg lights and rockets, I worked away.

she moaned and went AARRG UG, HO AH, HA … I knew then she was only pretending to be asleep. trying to save her winehead honor which was just as terrible and just as real as all the honored. I was just jamming the guts out of her with my demented and falsified glory.

she is just PRETENDING to be asleep and I am a MAN AND NOTHING, 0, NOTHING CAN WHIP ME!

I seemed to have a lot of string for a change and the glory of it and the magic-horse violence of me, of it, of everything obsessed me. I poked and rammed and jammed and everything was pure.

then in the excitement the blanket fell back. I saw more clearly the head. the back of the head and the shoulders — it was one Baldy M. American MALE! all went limp. I fell back in indecent horror. I fell back sick, staring at the ceiling, and not a drink in the place. Baldy M. did not move or speak I finally decided to sleep and wait for morning.

in the morning we awakened and nothing was mentioned. somebody came in and we got up a little money for wine.

and the days went on and I kept waiting for him to leave. the girls began looking at me strangely. he stayed two weeks, three weeks. and he didn’t run a tight ship, as they say. one evening after unloading crates of frozen fish from boxcars, my hand cut and bleeding, one foot numbed and almost broken from a falling crate, I limped on into a party in my room. the party was all right, I never bitch on wine drinking. but the sink in my place had been getting bad. they had eaten all my canned food, used up all the glasses and dishes and silverware, and it was all in the sink in the water, the stinking water, and the sink was clogged and that was all right, that was almost normal, but when I looked into the sink and found they had also found my paper plates and used them and threw them into the sink, floating there, that was bad, but then on top of that, somebody had VOMITED into the sink, and when I saw that, I poured a water glass full of wine, drank it down, and crashed the glass against the wall and screamed, “THAT’S IT! EVERYBODY OUT! NOW!”

they filed on out, the whores and the men, and the scrubwoman Helen, I had once screwed her too, white hair and all, and out they went solemnly, sadly. everybody left but Baldy M.

he just sat on the edge of the bed saying, “Hank, Hank, whatza matta? whatza matta, Hank?”

“shut up or I’ll k.o. you, so help me christ!”

I went out to the hall phone. I found the number of his mother. he was one of those pure and brilliant, stupid, high eye-Q bastards who lives with his mother forever.

“listen, Mrs. M., please come and get your son. this is Hank.”

“oh, that’s where he has BEEN! I thought so, but I didn’t know where you lived. we turned in a missing person report on him. you’re bad for him, Hank. Listen Henry, why don’t you leave my boy alone?” (her “boy” was 32 years old.) “I’ll try, Mrs. M. now why don’t you come get him?”

“I just can’t understand why he stayed so LONG this time. he usually likes to come home after a day or two out.”

“just come and get him.”

I gave her the address, then went back to the room.

“your mother is coming to get you,” I told him.

“no, I don’t want to go. no! listen, Hank, is there any more wine? I need a drink, Hank.”

I poured him a wine and poured myself one.

he drank some of the wine. “I don’t want to go,” he said.

“listen, I kept asking you to leave. you wouldn’t leave. I had one of two choices. either to beat hell out of you and throw you out into the street or phone your mother. I’ve phoned your mother.”

“but I’m a MAN! I’M A MAN, DON’T YOU SEE? I WAS IN THE CHINA THEATRE! I LED THE CHINESE TROOPS THROUGH THE FIELDS! I WAS A FIRST LT. IN THE AMERICAN ARMY IN MOMENTS OF DANGER!”

and it was true. he had done that. and had been honorably discharged. I refilled our glasses.

"to the China theatre," I toasted.

"to the China theatre," he said.

we drank them down.

then he began again: "I'm a MAN! god damn it. can't you see that I am a MAN? jesus christ, can't you see THAT I AM A MAN?"

she arrived about 15 minutes later, only said one word: "WILLIAM!" then she reached over on the bed and took him by the ear. she was a bent old lady, surely nearing 60. she tools him by the EAR and lifted him from the bed and still holding his ear she took him down the hall and stood and pushed the elevator button, him bent almost double and crying, him crying all the time. those big REAL tears running dripping sliding down his face. and she took him into the elevator by his ear and as they went down I could hear him crying, "I AM A MAN, I AM A MAN, I AM A MAN!" and then I went to the window and watched as they walked down the sidewalk. she was still holding him by the EAR, this old woman of 60. and then and there she threw him into the car and got into the other side while he was lying on the car seat. and then and there she drove off with my only piece of round-eye crying, "I AM A MAN! I AM A MAN!"

I never saw him again nor did I ever make any particular effort to look for him.

---

the night the 300 pound whore came in I was ready. nobody else was ready but I was ready. she was god awful fat all around and not very clean either. where the hell she had come from and what she wanted and how she had survived up to now was a question you could ask about any human being, and so we drank drank and laughed and I sat next to her, pressed next to her, sniffing and laughing and goading.

"baby, baby, I could reach you with something that could make you cry instead of laugh!"

“ah hahahahaha, ha” she laughed.

“when I put it in, my head will reach your head, all the way through the stomach, esophagus, up through the trachea, yeah!”

“ah hahahahaha, ha!”

“god damn, I bet when you shit that the cheeks of your ass hang down to the floor, eh? and when you shit, baby, you clog the plumbing for a month. eh?”

“ah hahahahaha, ha!”

at closing time we left together — me 6 feet tall and 165 pounds and she 5 feet and 300 pounds. the lonely and ridiculous world was walking down the sidewalk together. I finally got me a piece of ass better than a knothole.

we made it to the outside of my rooming house. I reached for my key.

“jesus christ.” I heard her say, “what’s that?”

I looked around us. behind us was a very simple and small building with a very simple sign: STOMACH HOSPITAL.

“oh, that? laugh now baby, I like your laugh, let me hear you laugh now, baby!”

“it’s a dead body, they’re bringing out a dead body!”

“a friend of mine, old time football player, used to block for Red Grange. I saw him this afternoon. he looked fine. I gave him a pack of smokes. they sneak the dead out at night. I see them drag one or two stiffs out each night. bad business to do it in daylight.”

“how do you know it’s your friend?”

“bone structure, shape of the head under the sheet. one night when I was high I almost decided to snatch a body when they went back in. I don’t know what I would have done with the damn thing. stood it up in a closet I guess.”

“where they going now?”

“to get another body. how’s your stomach?”

“fine, fine!”

we got upstairs, somehow, although one time she lurched and I thought she was going to take out the whole west wall.

we stripped and I got on top.

“jesus christ!” I said, “show me some MOVEMENT!”

“don’t just LAY there like a giant pot of putty! lift those vast and giant redwood legs … mother I can’t FIND you!”

she started giggling, “oh, hehehehehe, oh, hehehehehehehehe.”

“oh what the flick!” I snarled. “MOVE IT! SHAKE IT!”

then she really started to bounce and whirl. I hung on and tried to find the rhythm: she rotated pretty good, but it was rotate and then up and down and then back to rotate. I got the rhythm of the rotate, but on the up and down I got thrown out of the saddle several times. I mean the deck would be coming up as I hit it, which is all right under ordinary conditions, but with her as I hit the deck coming on it simply caroomed me completely out of the saddle and oftentime almost out of the bed onto the floor. I remember one time almost grabbing at a giant tit of a breast thing, but it was a most horrible and indecent looking thing and I simply hung to the side of the mattress like a hungry bedbug, lurched forward again and flung myself like some dog back into the center of that 300 pounds, sinking again into the center of “oh, hehehehehe, oh, hehehehehe,” and riding and hanging on, not knowing whether I was fucking or being fucked, but then, one seldom does.

“may the good Lord be with us.” I whispered into one of her fat hot dirty ears.

both being very drunk, we worked on and on, myself being thrown off again and again, but leaping back to battle. I’m sure we both wanted to quit but that somehow there was no way out. sex can sometimes become the most horrible of tasks. even once, in desperation, I grabbed one of those enormous breasts and lifted it like a flabby pancake thing and jammed a nipple into my mouth. it tasted of sadness, of rubber and agony and spoiled yogurt. I flung the thing out of my mouth with disgust, then dug back in.

finally I wore her down. I mean, she was still working, she did not lay back like dead, I've got to give her that, but I wore her down, got inside the rhythm, found it, hit it, hit it proper a score of times and finally like a house of resistance that doesn't want to give, it gave, she gave, I had her hooked. finally, she moaned and cried like a small child, and I smoked it out. it was beautiful. then we slept.

in the morning when we awakened, I found that the bed was flat on the floor. we had broken all four legs down to the floor in our crazy freakfuck.

"oh lord!" I said. "Oh lord! Lord!"

"whatza matta, Hank?"

"we broke the bed."

"I thought we might."

"yeah, but I don't have any money. I can't pay for a new bed."

"I don't have any money either."

"I guess I ought to give you some money, Ann."

"no please don't you're the first man who has made me feel anything in years."

"well, thanks, but I've got this goddamned bed on my mind now."

"you want me to leave?"

"no hard feelings, but do. it's the bed. I'm worried."

"sure Hank. can I use the bathroom first?"

"of course."

she got dressed and went down the hall to the crapper. when she came back she stood in the doorway.

"goodbye, Hank."

"goodbye, Ann."

I felt lousy letting her go like that, but it was the bed, then I remembered the rope I had bought to hang myself with. it was good sturdy rope. I found that all the bed legs were cracked along a central grain. it was only a matter of binding them like broken human legs. I tied them back together. then I got dressed and went downstairs.

the landlady was waiting. "I saw that woman leaving. she was a woman of the streets, mr. Bukowski. I do believe she was up in your room. I know all my other roomers too well."

"Mother," I said, "few men can do without."

then I hit the streets. made for the bar. the drinks came along all right, but I had the bed on my mind. it's screwy, I thought, for a man who wants to kill himself to be worried about a bed, but I was. so I had a few more and went on back. the landlady was waiting.

"mr. Bukowski, you can't fool me with all that rope! you busted that bed! my lands, there must have been some goings on up there last night to bust all FOUR legs on that bed!"

"I'm sorry," I said, "I can't pay for that bed. I lost my job as a busboy and all my short stories are coming back from *Harpers* and the *Atlantic Monthly*."

"well, we've got you a new bed!"

"a new bed?"

"yes, Lila is putting it together now."

Lila was a beautiful little colored maid. I had only seen her once or twice because she worked days, and days I was usually down at the bar, drinking it up.

"well," I said, "I'm tired, maybe I ought to go on up."

"yes, I should think you would be tired."

we walked up the stairway together. we passed a cloth sign on the wall: GOD BLESS THIS HOUSE.

"Lila!" the landlady said as we got near the top of the stairway near my room.

"yes?"

"how you comin' with the bed?"

"oh man, this god damned thing knocks me out! I can't seem to get the last laig in! thing just din't seem to fit nohow!"

we both stood outside my door.

"listen ladies," I said, "please pardon me, I have to go to the bathroom for a while …"

I went down to the bathroom and had a good slow but steady beer — vodka — wine — whiskey shit. what a stink! I flushed it away and walked back toward my room. as I got near, I heard a final pounding then my landlady began to laugh and then they were both laughing together. then I walked in. their laughter stopped. their faces got very stern, I might say, even angry. my beautiful colored maid ran out and down the stairway and then I began to hear her laughing again. then the landlady stood in the doorway and looked at me.

"please try to behave yourself Mr. Bukowski. we have only the finest tenants in here."

then she slowly closed the door and then it was shut.

I looked at the bed. it was made of steel.

then I undressed and climbed naked between the new sheets of my new bed, Philadelphia, one p.m. in the afternoon the sky spreading all over the place outside, I pulled the clean white sheet and the cover up to my chin and then I slept, alone, easy, gracious and touched by the miracle. it was o.k.

"Dear Mr. Bukowski:

You say you began writing at 35. what were you doing before then?

E.R."

"Dear E.R.

Not writing."

Mary tried all the tricks. she really didn't want to leave that night. she came out of the bathroom with her hair all piled to one side. "look!" I'd just pour another wine "whore, you god damned whore …" then she came out with big lips on, big fat lipstick. "look! ya ever see Mrs. Johnson?"

"whore, whore ya god damned whore …"

I went over and lay on the bed, cigarette in one hand, wineglass half tottering on the nightstand. barefoot, in shorts and undershirt a week dirty. she came over and stood over me.

"YOU'RE THE NUMBER ONE RAT OF ALL TIMES!"

"ah, hahahahaha," I snickered.

"well, I'm leaving!"

"that doesn't concern me. just one thing I'm warning you about!"

"what's that?"

"don't slam that door when you leave. I'm getting tired of slamming doors. if you slam that door I'm going to have to deck you."

"you wouldn't have the GUTS!"

she really slammed that door when she left. it was so loud it put me in a state of shock. when the wall stopped trembling I leaped up, drained the wineglass and opened the door. there was no time to dress. she heard me open the door and started running, but she had on high heels. I ran down the hall in my shorts and caught her at the top of the stairway. I spun her and gave her a fair open hand slap along the cheek. she screamed and went down. as she fell her legs went down last and I looked up her dress at those long fine legs spun in nylon, I saw way up, and I thought, god damn, I must be Crazy! but there was no way out and I turned and walked slowly back to the door, opened it, closed it, sat down and poured a wine. I could hear her crying out there. then I heard another door open.

"whatza matta, honey?" it was another woman.

"he HIT me! my husband HIT me!"

(HUSBAND?)

"oh you poor dear, let me help you up."

"thank you."

"what are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. I don't have any place to stay."

(lying bitch)

"well listen, get yourself a room overnight, then when he goes to work you can come back here."

"WORK!" she screamed, "WORK! WHY THAT SON OF A BITCH HAS NEVER WORKED A DAY IN HIS LIFE!!"

I thought that was very funny. I thought that was so funny that I couldn't stop laughing. I had to turn and put my face into the pillow so that Mary couldn't hear me. when I finally stopped laughing and pulled my face out of the pillow and got up and looked down the hall, everybody was gone.

she was back a couple days later and it was the same old thing me in my shorts getting sour and Mary getting all dressed up fine getting ready to leave, trying to show me what I was going to lose.

"this time I'm not coming back! I've had it truly! I've had it! I'm sorry, I can't stand you anymore. you're just damn rotten through and through and that's all there is to it."

"you're a whore, you're nothing but a god damned whore …"

"sure I'm a whore or else I wouldn't be living with you."

"hmmm, I never thought of it that way."

"think of it."

I drained a wineglass. "this time I'm going to WALK you to the door, open it and close it MYSELF and wish you well. are you ready dear?"

I walked to the door and stood there in my shorts, refilled wineglass in my hand, waiting. "come come, I don't have all night. let's get to the crux of this thing, shall we? Ummmm?"

she didn't like it. she walked out the door, turned, stood facing me.

"well, come come now, toddle off into the night. maybe you can sell some of that syphed-up snatch for a buck and a quarter to that newsboy with the right thumb missing and the face like a rubber mask. toodle-ooh, dear."

I started to close the door and she raised her purse over her head, "you ROTTEN son of a bitch!" I saw the purse coming down and just stood there with a little calm smile on my face. I'd been in some fights with some rough boys; a woman's purse was the last thing I was worried about. it came down. I felt it. plenty. she had stuffed the thing and in the front corner, the part that hit me over the head was a white cold cream jar. it was like a rock.

"baby." I said. I was still grinning and holding onto the doorknob, but I couldn't move, I was Frozen.

she came down with the purse again.

“listen, baby,”

again.

“oh, baby.”

the legs began to go. as I folded slowly down she had more leverage for the top of the head. she really went to it, faster and faster as if she was trying to crack my skull. it was my third k.o. in a rather spotted career, but the first by a woman.

when I awakened the door was closed and I was alone. I looked around and the floor was an inch thick in my blood. luckily the whole apartment was covered with linoleum. I splashed through the stuff and headed for the kitchen. I’d saved a bottle of whiskey for a special occasion. this was it. I opened it and poured a good bit of it over my head, then I poured a glassful and drank it straight down. rotten bitch had tried to KILL me! unbelievable. I thought of turning her in to the police, but that wasn’t any good. they’d probably get their charge out of it and throw me in too.

we were on the fourth floor. I had a little more whiskey and walked over to the closet. I got her dresses, shoes, pants, slips, brassieres, slippers, hankies, garterbelts, all that crap and piled it in front of the window, one by one sipping at my whiskey. “god damned whore tried to kill me …” sailed them out the window. there was a large vacant lot below next to a small house. the apartment was built next to an excavation so we were really about eight stories high. I tried for the electric wires with the panties, but I missed. then I got angry and started throwing things out without aiming. shoes and panties and dresses were all over the place … on bushes, in trees, across the fence or just flat in the lot. then I felt better, began to work on the whiskey, found a mop and mopped the place up.

in the morning my head really hurt. I couldn’t comb my hair but wet it back with my hands. a huge three inch scab had formed on my head. it was about 11 a.m. I walked down the steps and got down to the first floor and went out the back to pick up the clothes and stuff. it was all gone. I couldn’t understand. there was an old fart working in the backyard of the small house, poking around with a trowel.

"listen," I asked the old fart, "did you happen to see any clothes lying around here?"

"what kinda clothes?"

"women's clothes."

"they were all around here. I gathered them up for the salvation army. I phoned the salvation army to come get them."

"those were my wife's clothes."

"looked like somebody threw them away."

"a mistake."

"well, I still got them in a box."

"you have? listen, can I have them back?"

"sure, only it looked like somebody threw them away."

the old fart went into the house and came back with the box. he handed it over the fence to me. "thanks," I said.

"it's all right." he turned around, dropped to his knees and plunged the trowel into the ground. I took the clothes back upstairs.

she came back that night with Eddie and the Duchess. they had wine. I poured it all around. "the place sure looks clean." said Eddie.

"listen, Hank. let's not fight anymore. I get sick of this fighting! and you know I love you, I really do." said Mary.

"yeah."

the Duchess sat there with the hair all down in her face, her stockings all torn, and little rolls of spit coming down the side of her mouth. I made a note to get into her. she had that sick sexy look. I sent Mary and Eddie out for more wine and the minute the door closed I grabbed the Duchess and threw her on the bed. she was all bones and looked very dramatic. the poor thing probably hadn't eaten food for two weeks. I dropped it in. it wasn't bad. a fasty. we were sitting in the chair when they got back.

we'd been drinking about another hour when the Duchess looked up out of that hair and pointed that bony death finger at me. there had been a lull in the conversation. the finger kept pointing at me, then she said “he raped me, he raped me while you were out getting the wine.”

“listen Eddie, you’re not going to believe that are you?”

“sure, I’m going to believe it.”

“listen if you can’t trust a friend then get the hell out of here!”

“the Duchess doesn’t lie. if the Duchess said that you …”

“GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE! GOD DAMN YOU SONS OF BITCHES!”

I stood up and threw a full glass of wine smashing it against the north wall.

“me too?” asked Mary.

“YOU TOO!” I pointed my own finger at her.

“oh Hank, I thought we were through with all this, I’m so tired of breakups …”

they filed on out. Eddie in front, the Duchess next, followed by Mary. the Duchess kept saying “he raped me, I tell you he raped me. he raped me, I tell you, he raped me …” she was crazy.

they were just outside the door when I grabbed Mary’s wrist.

“come in here, bitch!”

I pulled her back into the room and put the chain on the door. then I grabbed her and gave her a big sexy kiss, ripping at a whole haunch of her butt with one hand.

“oh, Hank…”

she liked it.

“Hank, Hank, you didn’t screw that bag of bones did you?”

I didn’t answer. I just kept working on her. I heard her purse fall to the floor. one of her hands went to my balls and squeezed them. I was getting in deep, I needed a rest, about an hour or so.

“I threw all your clothes out of the window,” I said.

“WHAT?” the hand dropped away from my balls, the eyes were very wide.

“but I went out and picked them up, let me tell you about it.”

I walked over and poured two more drinks. “you know you almost killed me, don’t you?”

“what?”

"you mean you don't remember?"

I sat down with my drink in a chair and she came over and looked at the top of my head. "oh you poor baby. god, I'm sorry."

she leaned down and kissed that bloody scab very tenderly. then I reached up and under her skirt and then we tangled again. I needed about forty-five minutes. there we stood in the middle of the room wrestling amidst poverty and broken glass. there would be no fight that night, there were no whores or bums anywhere. love had taken over. and the clean linoleum tossed with our shadows.

* * *

it was New Orleans, the French Quarter, and I stood on the sidewalk and watched a drunk leaning against a wall and the drunk was crying, and the Italian was asking him "are you a Frenchman?" and the Frenchman said, "yes I'm a Frenchman." and the Italian hit him in his face hard, knocking his head against the wall, and then he asked the drunk again, "are you a Frenchman?" and the frog would say yes, and the wop would hit him again, meanwhile saying over and over again, "I'm your friend, I'm your friend, I'm only trying to help you. don't you understand that?" and the Frenchman would say yes and the Italian would hit him again. there was another Italian sitting in his car shaving with a flashlight hung up and shining in his face. it seemed very odd. there he sat with shaving cream all over his face and shaving with his long open razor. he just ignored the action and sat there shaving away in the night. that was all right until the Frenchman fell away from the wall and staggered toward the car. the Frenchman grabbed at the car door and said "help!" and the Italian hit him again. "I'm your friend. I'm your FRIEND!" and the Frenchman fell against the car and joggled the whole car and the Italian inside evidently cut himself and he leaped out of the car with all of the shaving cream on and the cut growing on his face and he said "you sona bitch!" and he began slicing at the Frenchman's face and when the Frenchman held up his hands he sliced at the hands. "you sona bitch, you dirty sona bitch!"

it was my second night in town and very hard to take, so I went inside the bar there and sat down and the guy next to me turned and asked, “are you a Frenchman or an Italian?” and I said, “actually I was born in China. my father was a missionary and was killed by a tiger when I was a very little boy.”

just then somebody behind me began to play on a violin and that saved me from further questions. I worked at my beer. when the violin stopped somebody came up on the other side of me and sat down. “my name’s Sunderson. you look like you need a job.”

“I need money. work I’m not crazy about.”

“all you have to do is sit in this chair a few more hours a night.”

“what’s the catch?”

“eighteen bucks a week and keep your hands out of the cash register.”

“how you gonna keep me from doing that?”

“I’m paying another guy eighteen bucks a week to watch you.”

“are you a Frenchman?”

“Sunderson. Scotch — English. distant relative of Winston Churchill.”

“I thought there was something wrong with you.”

* * *

it was a place where the cabbies from this cab co. would come in for gas. I would pump the gas, take the money and throw it into the register. most of the night I sat in a chair. the job went all right the first 2 or 3 nights. a little argument with the cabbies who wanted me to change flats for them. some Italian boy got on the phone and raised shit with the boss because I wouldn’t do anything but I knew why I was there — to protect the money, the old man had shown me where the gun was, how to use it and be sure to make the cabbies pay for all the gas and oil they used. but I had no desire to protect the $$$$$$ for eighteen bucks a week and that was where Sunderson’s thinking was wrong. I would have taken the money myself, but the morals were all fucked up: somebody had jobbed me with the crazy idea one time that stealing was wrong, and I was having a hard time overcoming my preconceptions. meanwhile I worked on them, against them, with them, you know.

about the fourth night a little negress stood in the doorway. she just stood there smiling at me. we must have been looking at each other for about 3 minutes. “how you doing?” she asked. “my name’s Elsie.”

“I’m not doing very good. my name’s Hank.”

she came in and leaned against a little old desk in there. she seemed to have on a little girl’s dress, she had little girl movements and the fun in her eyes, but she was a woman, throbbing and miraculous electric woman in a brown and clean little girl’s dress. “can I buy a soft drink?”

“sure.”

she gave me the money and I watched her open the cover of the soft drink box and, with much serious deliberation, she selected a drink. then she sat on the little stool and I watched her drink it down. the little bubbles of air floating through electric light, through the bottle. I looked at her body, I looked at her legs, I was filled with the warm brown kindness of her. it was lonely in that place just sitting in that chair night after night for eighteen bucks a week.

she handed me the empty bottle.

“thanks.”

“yeh.”

“mind if I bring some of my girl friends over tomorrow night?”

“if they’re anything like you sweetie, bring them all.”

“they’re all like me.”

“bring them all.”

the next night there were three or four of them, talking and laughing and buying and drinking soft drinks. jesus, I mean they were sweet, young, full of the thing, all young colored little girls, everything was funny and beautiful, and I mean it was, they made me feel that way. the next night there were eight or ten of them, the next night thirteen or fourteen. they began bringing in gin or whiskey and mixing it with the soft drinks. I brought my own. but Elsie, the first one was the finest of them all. she'd sit on my lap and then leap up and scream, "hey, Jesus Christ, you gonna shove my TESTINES out of the top of my head with that there FISHPOLE!" she'd act angry, real angry, and the other girls would laugh. and I'd just sit there confused, smiling, but in a sense I was happy. they had too much for me but it was a good show. I began to loosen up a bit myself. when a driver would honk, I'd stand up a bit leery, finish my drink, go find the gun, hand it to Elsie and say, "now look Elsie baby, you guard that god damned register for me, and if any of them girls makes a move toward it, you go on and shoot a hole in her pussy for me, eh?"

and I'd leave Elsie in there staring down at that big luger. it was a strange combo, the both of them, they could kill a man, or save him, depending upon which way it went. the history of man, woman and the world. and I'd walk out to pump the gas.

then the Italian cabbie, Pinelli, came in one night for a soft drink. I liked his name, but I didn't like him. he was the guy that bitched most about me not changing flats. I was not anti-Italian at all but it was strange that since I had landed in town that the Italian Faction was at the forefront of my misery. but I knew it was a mathematical, rather than a racial thing. in Frisco an old Italian woman had probably saved my life. but that was another story. Pinelli stalked in. and I mean STALKED. the girls were all around the place, talking and laughing. he walked over and lifted the lid of the soft drink container.

"GOD DAMN IT, ALL THE SOFT DRINKS ARE GONE AND I'M THIRSTY! WHO DRANK ALL THE SOFT DRINKS?"

"I did," I told him.

it was very quiet. all the girls were watching. Elsie was standing right by me watching him. Pinelli was handsome if you didn't look too long or too deep. the hawk nose, the black hair, the Prussian officer swagger, the tight pants, the little boy fury.

"THESE GIRLS DRANK ALL THOSE SOFT DRINKS, AND THESE GIRLS AREN'T SUPPOSED TO BE IN HERE, THESE DRINKS ARE FOR TAXI DRIVERS ONLY!"

then he came close to me, stood there, spreading his legs like a chicken does, a bit, before it craps:

"YOU KNOW WHAT THESE GIRLS ARE, WISE GUY?"

"sure, these girls are my friends."

"NO, THESE GIRLS ARE WHORES! THEY WORK IN THREE WHOREHOUSES ACROSS THE STREET! THAT'S WHAT THEY ARE — WHORES!"

nothing was said. we just all sat there looking at the Italian. it seemed like a long look. then he turned and walked out. the rest of the night was hardly the same, I was worried about Elsie. she had the gun. I walked over to her and took the gun.

"I almost gave that son of a bitch a new belly button," she said, "his mother was a whore!"

the next thing I knew the place was empty. I sat and had a long drink. then I got up and looked at the cash register. it was all there.

about 5 a.m. the old man came in.

"Bukowski."

"yes, Mr. Sunderson?"

"I gotta let you go." (familiar words)

"what's wrong?"

"the boys say you ain't been runnin' this place right, place full of whores and you here playin' around. them with their breasts out and snatches out and you suckin' and lickin' and tonguin'. is THAT what goes on around here early in the morning?"

"well, not exactly."

"well I'm gonna take your spot until I can find a more dependable man. got to find out what's going on around here."

"all right it's your circus, Sunderson."

I think it was two nights later that I was coming out of the bar and decided to walk past the old gas station. there were two or three police cars around.

I saw Marty, one of the cab drivers I got along with. I went up to him:

"what's up Marty?"

"they knifed Sunderson, and shot one of the cabbies with Sunderson's gun."

"jesus, just like a movie. the cabbie they shot, was it Pinelli?"

"yeah, how'd you know?"

"get it in the belly?"

"yeah, yeah, how'd you know?"

I was drunk. I walked away back towards my room. It was high New Orleans moon. I kept walking towards my room and soon the tears came, a great wash of tears in the moonlight. and then they stopped and I could feel the tear-water drying on my face, stretching the skin. when I got to my room I didn't bother with the light, got my shoes off, my socks off, and fell back on the bed without Elsie, my beautiful black whore, and then I slept, I slept through the sadness of everything and when I awakened I wondered what the next town would be, the next job. I got up, put on my shoes and socks, and went out for a bottle of wine. the streets didn't look very good, they seldom did. it was a structure planned by rats and men and you had to live within it and die within it. but like a friend of mine once said "nothing was ever promised you, you signed no contract." I walked into the store for my wine.

the son of a bitch leaned forward just a little, waiting for his dirty coins.

---

scribbling on shirt cardboards during two day drunks:

When Love becomes a command, Hatred can become a pleasure.

* * *

if you don't gamble, you'll never win

* * *

Beautiful thoughts, and beautiful women never last

* * *

you can cage a tiger but you're never sure he's broken. Men are easier.

* * *

if you want to know where God is, ask a drunk.

* * *

there aren't any angels in the foxholes.

* * *

no pain means the end of feeling; each of our joys is a bargain with the devil.

* * *

the difference between Art and Life is that Art is more bearable

* * *

I'd rather hear about a live American bum than a dead Greek God.

* * *

there is nothing as boring as the truth

* * *

The well balanced individual is insane

* * *

Almost everybody is born a genius and buried an idiot

* * *

a brave man lacks imagination. Cowardice is usually caused by lack of proper diet.

* * *

sexual intercourse is kicking death in the ass while singing

* * *

when men rule governments, men won't need governments; until then we are screwed

* * *

an intellectual is a man who says a simple thing in a difficult way; an artist is a man who says a difficult thing in a simple way.

* * *

everytime I go to a funeral I feel as if I had eaten puffed wheat germ

* * *

dripping faucets, farts of passion, flat tires — are all sadder than death.

* * *

if you want to know who your friends are, get yourself a jail sentence

* * *

hospitals are where they attempt to kill you without explaining why. The cold and measured cruelty of the American Hospital is not caused by doctors who are overworked or who have gotten used to, and bored with death. it is caused by doctors WHO ARE PAID TOO MUCH FOR DOING TOO LITTLE and who are admired by the ignorant, as witchmen with cure, when most of the time they don't know their own arse-hairs from celery shreds.

* * *

Before a metropolitan daily exposes an evil, it takes its own pulse.

* * *

end of shirt cardboards.

well here's your Christmas story, little children — gather round.

"ah," said my friend Lou, "I think I got it."

"yeah?"

"yeah."

I poured another wine.

"we work together," he continued.

"sure."

"now you're a good talker, you tell a lot of interesting stories. it doesn't matter if they're true or not."

"they're true."

"I mean, that doesn't matter, now listen, here's what we do. there's a class bar down the street, you know it — Molino's. now you go in there and all you need is money for the first drink. we'll pool for that. now you sit down and nurse your drink and look around for a guy flashing a roll. they got some fat ones in there. you spot the guy and go over to him. use some pretext. you sit down next to him and turn it on. you turn on the bullshit. he'll like it. you've even got a vocabulary when high. one night you even claimed to me that you were a surgeon. you explained the complete operation on the mesocolon to me. o.k. so he'll buy you drinks all night, he'll drink all night. keep him drinking.

"now when closing time comes, you lead him west near Alvarado Street, lead him west past the alley. tell him you're going to get him some nice young pussy, tell him anything but lead him west. I'll be waiting in the alley with this."

Lou reached behind the door and came out with a baseball bat. it was a very large bat. I think at least forty-two oz.

"jesus christ Lou, you'll kill him!"

"naw, NAW, you can't kill a drunk, you know that! maybe if he were sober I'd kill him but drunk it'll only knock him out. we take the wallet and split it two ways."

"and the last thing he's gonna remember," I said, "is walking with me."

"that's right."

"I mean, he's gonna REMEMBER me, maybe swinging the bat is the better end of the deal."

"I gotta swing the bat, it's the only way we can work it because I don't have your line of bullshit."

"it's not bullshit."

"then you WERE a surgeon, I mean — "

"forget it, but let's put it this way — I can't do that sort of thing, set up a pigeon, because essentially I'm a nice guy, I'm not like that."

"you're no nice guy. you're the meanest son of a bitch I ever met. that's why I like you. you wanna fight now? I wanna fight you. you get first punch. when I was in the mines I once fought a guy with pick handles. he broke my arm with first swing they thought he had me. I beat him with one arm. he was never the same after that fight. he went goofy talked out the side of his mouth continually, about nothing. you get first punch."

and he pushed that battered crocodile head out at me.

"no, you get first punch." I told him, "SWING, MOTHER!"

he did. he knocked me over backwards in my chair. I got up and put one into his belly. the next one put me up against his sink. a dish fell to the floor and broke. I grabbed an empty wine bottle and threw it at his head. he ducked and it smashed against the door. then the door opened. it was our young blond landlady figure, looks, youth. it was so confusing. we both stood there looking at her.

"that'll be all of that." she said.

then she turned to me, "I saw you last night."

"you didn't see me last night."

"I saw you in the vacant lot next door."

"I wasn't there."

"you were there, you just don't remember. you were there drunk, I saw you in the moonlight."

"all right, what!"

"you were pissing. I saw you pissing in the moonlight in the center of that vacant lot."

"that doesn't sound like me."

"it was you. You do that once more and you're out. we can't have that here."

"baby," said Lou, "I love you, oh I love you so much just let me go to bed with you one time and I'll cut off both of my arms, I swear it!"

"shut up, you silly wino."

she closed the door and we sat down and had a wine.

I found one. a big fat one. I had been fired by fat stupidities like that all my life. from worthless underpaid, dull jobs. it was going to be nice. I got to talking. I didn't quite know what I was talking about. I mean I only sensed that my mouth was moving but he was listening and laughing and nodding his head and buying drinks. he had a wristwatch, a handful of rings, a full stupid wallet. it was hard work yet the drinks made it easy. I told him some stories about prisons, about railroad track gangs, about the whorehouse. he liked the whorehouse stuff. I told him about the guy who got in the bathtub naked, waited around for an hour while the whore took ex-lax, and then the whore came in and drizzled shit all over him and he came on the ceiling.

"oh no, REALLY!"

"oh yeah, really."

then I told him about the guy who came in every two weeks and he paid well. all he wanted was a whore in the room with him. they both took off their clothes and played cards and talked. just sat there. then after two hours he'd get dressed, say goodbye, and walk out. never touch the whore.

"god damn," he said.

"yeah."

I decided that I wouldn't mind Lou's slugger bat to hit a homer on that skull. what a fat whammy. what a useless hunk of shit who sucked the life out of his fellow man and out of himself. he sat there ponderously majestic with nothing but a way to make it easy in an insane society.

"you like young girls?" I asked him.

"oh yeah, yeah, yeah!"

"say around 15½?"

"oh jesus, yes."

"there's one coming in on the one thirty a.m. from Chicago. she'll be at my place around 2:10 a.m. she's clean, hot, intelligent. now I'm taking a big chance, so you got to trust me. I'm asking ten bucks in advance, and ten after you finish. that too high?"

"oh no, that's all right." he went into his pocket and came up with one of his dirty tens.

"o.k. when this place closes you come with me."

"sure, sure."

"now she's got these silver spurs with indented rubies, she can put them on and spur your thighs just as you're cracking your nuts. how’d you like that? but that’s five dollars extra.”

“no, I’d rather not have the spurs,” he said.

2 a.m. finally made it around and I walked him out there, down toward the alley. maybe Lou wouldn’t even be there. maybe the wine would get him or he’d just back out. a blow like that could kill a man, or make him addled for the rest of his life. we staggered along in the moonlight, there was nobody around, nobody on the streets.

it was going to be easy.

we crossed into the alley. Lou was there.

but fatso saw him. he threw up an arm and ducked as Lou swung the bat got me right behind the ear.

I fell on down in that rat filled alley (thinking for just a flash: I’ve got the ten, I’ve got the ten.), I fell down in that alley full of used rubbers, shreds of old newspapers, lost washers, nails, match-sticks, matchbooks, dried worms, I fell down in that alley of clammy blow jobs and sadistic wet shadows, of starving cats, prowlers, fags — it came to me then — the luck and the way was mine: the meek shall inherit the earth.

I could barely hear fatso running off, felt Lou reaching for my wallet. then I was out of it.

---

he was a rich bastard in the steam bath, crying. he had all the recordings of J.S. Bach and it still wasn’t doing him any good. he had stained glass windows in his place plus a photo of a nun pissing. still: no good. he once had a taxi driver murdered at full moon in the Nevada Desert while he watched. that — wore off in 30 minutes. he tied dogs to crosses and burned out their eyes with his dollar cigars. old stuff. he had screwed so many fine young golden-legged girls that it — wasn’t any good anymore.

nothing.

he had exotic ferns burning while he bathed, he threw drinks in the face of his butler.

a rich bastard, insidious paste he was. a real old creep. a spitter into the guts of roses.

he kept crying there on the table as I smoked one of his dollar cigars.

"help me, oh JESUS help me!" he screamed.

it was about time. "wait a minute," I told him.

I went to the locker and got the belt and then he bent over on the table, and all that white mushmeat, that hairy sickening ass, and I swung and laid the belt buckle across hard again and again: ZAP! ZAP!

ZAP! ZAP! ZAP!

he fell off the table like a crab looking for sea. he crawled on the floor and I followed him with the buckle.

ZAP!

ZAP!

ZAP!

while he screamed again two or three times I leaned down and burned him with the cigar.

then he laid flat, smiling.

I walked into the kitchen where his lawyer sat drinking coffee.

"finished?"

"yeah."

he peeled off five tens, threw them across the table. I poured a coffee and sat down. the cigar was still in my hand. I threw it into the sink.

"jesus," I said, "Jesus Christ."

"yeah," said the lawyer, "the last guy only lasted a month."

we sat there sipping the coffee. it was a nice kitchen.

"come back next Wednesday," he said.

"why don't you do it for me?" I asked.

"ME? I'm too sensitive!"

we both laughed and I dropped 2 cubes of sugar.

---

he came down through the laundry shoot and as he slid out, Maxfield hit him with an ax handle, breaking his neck. we went through his pockets. we had the wrong man. "ah, shit," Maxfield said. "ah, shit," I said.

I went upstairs and phoned.

"rabbit ram kay remus. hard," I said.

"shoot bugger damn lame," Steinfelt said.

"spooks," I said, "spooks down tender."

"fuck you," said Steinfelt. he hung up.

as I walked in down there, Maxfield was going down on the dead corpse.

"I always suspected you," I told him.

"bugger bugger reeme," he lifted his mouth to speak.

"what's THAT got to do with it?" I asked.

"gluub," he said.

I sat down on top of a deactivated washing machine. "listen, if we are going to have a better world," I told him, "we are not only going to have to fight in the streets we are going to have to fight in and with our minds. also, if our women can't keen their toenails clean it's a cinch they can't keep their pussies clean. before you pinch a woman's ass, ask her to remove her boots."

"gluub," he said. he got up, satisfied, and removed the corpse's eyeballs. with his jackknife. swastika handle. he looked like Celine at his best. he swallowed the eyeballs.

we both sat and waited.

"have you read *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*?"

"I'm afraid that I have."

"the maximum danger implies the maximum hope."

"you got a smoke?" I asked.

"sure," he said.

as soon as I got the thing good and lit I reached over and pressed the red ash end against his hairy wrist.

"oh, shit," he said. "oh, DO stop that!"

"you're lucky I didn't press the thing into your hairy ass."

"I should be so lucky."

"strip."

he heard me.

"spread your cheeks."

"I pledge allegiance," he said, "to the ..."

Rimsky Korsakov's cherrazad came on over the overhead wiring, I jammed, no, I jammed the red tip in.

“jesus,” he said.

I kept it in there. “why did they raid the Hullabaloo?”

“jesus,” he said.

“I asked you a question! why did they?”

“they did,” he said. “they did because they did. I am child to my ignorance!”

“let’s get to the bottom of this thing,” I suggested, placing the burning tip all the way in.

COCKTAILS

"jesus," he said, "oh, sweet jesus!"

"almost every man knows the exactness of his imbecility but who can live the short sweet sheen of his swooning jewning genius?"

"only YOU, Charles Bukowski!"

"you are a brilliant man, Maxfield." I removed the cigarette, sniffed it, no sniffed it and threw it away.

"for cat's asses you take the cake, baby," I told him, "sit down."

"really," he said.

I sat down.

"now, actually," I told him, "it is easy to understand Camus if you follow me. a brukk, a banko, a sestina-vik, like that, a brilliant writer yes, but he sucked in."

"what thevik — fuck are you talking about?" he asked.

"I mean letters to COMBAT. I mean speeches given for L'Amitie Francaise. I mean statements made at the Dominican Monastery of Latour-Maubourg in 1948. I mean the reply to Gabriel Marcel. I mean the speech he gave at the Labor Exchange of Saint-Etienne on 10 May 1958. I mean the speech delivered 7 December 1955 at a banquet in honor of President Eduardo Santos, editor of II Tiempo, driven out of Colombia by the dictatorship. I mean the letter to M. Aziz Kessous. I mean the interview in Demain, issue of 24-30 October 1957."

"I mean, sucked-in, sucked out of position; I mean jacked-off, taken. he died in a car he was no longer driving. it is very fine to be a good guy and enter the field of human affairs; it is something else to see a little shit like you knocking great dead men of human affairs. the large become large targets for small men — small men with rifles, typewriters, unsigned notes under the door, badges, clubs, dogs, these things of small men work too."

"why don't you go fuck yourself?" I asked him.

"trivial angers like trivial pussies will disappear into October's sunlight," he told me.

"sounds good. how about the OTHER kinds?"

"same thing."

"jesus," I said. "jesus," I said.

"sincerely," he said, putting his head, no his hand, on my knee. "I really can't tell you why they raided the hullabaloo."

"could Camus have?" I asked.

"what?"

"raided the Hullabaloo."

"hell no!"

"would he have had an opinion on it?" I asked.

"hell, yes!"

we both stayed in silence a long time.

"whatta we gonna do with this dead body?" I asked.

"I already done it." said Maxwell.

"I mean, NOW."

"your turn now."

"forget it."

we both stayed in silence and looked at the dead body.

"whyant you phone Steinfelt?" asked Maxwell.

" 'whyant'?"

"yeah. 'whyant'?"

"you sure get on my nerves."

I went upstairs and took the phone off the hook. every other phone in America resting in the cradle, all replaced, no more hooks — here was a fucking thing hanging on a hook like a huge resting Negro dong. I picked it up, took it in my hand. It was sweating, of course. and smeared with dry sphagetti, or however you spell it — dried worms who had lost the last race.

"Steinfelt," I spoke.

"who won the 9th?" he asked.

"harness or Del Mar?"

"harness."

"Jonboy Star, entered in 5 grand claimer. ran for 6 at Spokane with Asaphr up, post 8, 6 by 2 and one half. got post 2, switched to Jack Williams. morning line 4. opened 7 to 2. last minute action brought it down to 2 to one. won easy."

"who'd you have?"

"Smoke Concert."

"so what the hell is it?" he asked.

"rabbit ram kay remus. hard."

"shoot bugger damn lame," Steinfelt said.

"spooks," I said. "spooks down tender. most tender."

"fuck you twice," said Steinfelt.

he hung up.

and I, I walked back in there, I, I, I did. if did, banko bunko sestina-vink vik. Copeland's Fanfare for the Common Man was on the overhead wire. Maxfield was back on down on the buggy dead corpse.

I watched him. I watched him for a while.

"my friend," I told him, "our job is not easy and our destinies are incomplete. think of Africa, think of Vietnam, think of Watts, Detroit; think of the Boston Red Sox and the L.A. Country museum, county, I mean. think of anything. think of how bad you look in the mirror of life."

"blubb," said Maxfield.

the Decline and Fall of the West was before me. just give me ten years more, ten more years. dear Spengler. Oswald? OSWALD???? Oswald Spengler.

I walked over, sat on the washing machine and waited.

---

sit down, Stirkoff.

thank you, sir.

stretch your legs.

most gracious of you, sir.

Stirkoff, I understand you've been writing articles on justice, equality; also the right to joy and survival. Stirkoff?

yes, sir?

do you think that there will ever be an overwhelming and sensible justice in the world?

not really, sir.

then why do you write that shit? aren't you feeling well?

I've been feeling strange lately, sir, almost as if I were going mad.

are you drinking a great deal, Stirkoff?

of course, sir.

and do you play with yourself?

constantly, sir.

how?

I don't understand, sir.

I mean, how do you go about it?

four or five raw eggs and a pound of hamburger in a thinnecked flower bowl while listening to Vaughn Williams or Darius Milhaud.

glass?

no, ass, sir.

I mean, the vase, it is glass?

of course not, sir.

have you ever been married?

many times, sir.

what went wrong?

everything, sir.

what was the best piece of ass you ever had?

four or five raw eggs and a pound of hamburger in a …

all right, all right!

yes, it is.

do you realize that your yearning for justice and a better world is only a front to hide the decay and shame and failure that reside within you?

yep.

did you have a vicious father?

I don't know sir.

what do you mean, you don't know?

I mean, it's hard to compare. you see, I only had one.

are you getting smart with me, Stirkoff?

oh no, sir; like you say, justice is impossible.

did your father beat you?

they took turns.

I thought you only had one father.

every man has. I mean, my mother got in hers.

did she love you?

only as an extension of herself.

what else can love be?

the common sense to care very much for something very good. it needn't be related by bloodline. it can be a red beachball or a piece of buttered toast.

you mean to say that you can LOVE a piece of buttered toast?

only some, sir. on certain mornings. in certain rays of sunlight. love arrives and departs without notice.

is it possible to love a human being?

of course, especially if you don't know them too well. I like to watch them through my window, walking down the street.

Stirkoff, you're a coward.

of course, sir.

what is your definition of a coward?

a man who would think twice before fighting a lion with his bare hands.

and what is your definition of a brave man?

a man who doesn't know what a lion is.

every man knows what a lion is.

every man assumes that he does.

and what is your definition of a fool?

a man who doesn't realize that Time, Structure and Flesh are being mostly wasted.

who then is a wise man?

there aren't any wise men, sir.

then there can't be any fools. if there isn't any night there can't be any day; if there isn't any white there can't be any black.

I'm sorry, sir. I thought that everything was what it was, not depending on something else.

you've had your cock in too many flower bowls. don't you understand that EVERYTHING is correct, that nothing can go wrong?

I understand, sir, that what happens, happens.

what would you say if I were to have you beheaded?

I wouldn't be able to say anything, sir.

I mean that if I were to have you beheaded I would remain the Will and you would become Nothing.

I would become something else.

at my CHOICE.

at both our choices, sir.

relax! relax! stretch your legs!

most gracious of you, sir.

no, most gracious of both of us.

of course. sir.

you say you often feel this madness. what do you do when it comes upon you?

I write poetry.

is poetry madness?

non-poetry is madness.

what is madness?

madness is ugliness.

what is ugly?

to each man, something different.

does ugliness belong?

it’s there.

does it belong?

I don’t know, sir.

you pretend knowledge. what is knowledge?

knowing as little as possible.

how can that be?

I don’t know, sir.

can you build a bridge?

no, sir.

can you make a gun?

no, sir.

these things are the products of knowledge.

these things are bridges and guns.

I am going to have you beheaded.

thank you, sir.

why?

you are my motivation when I have very little.

I am Justice.

perhaps.

I am the Winner. I will have you tortured, I will make you scream. I will make you wish for Death.

of course, sir.

don't you realize that I am your master?

you are my manipulator; but there is nothing you can do to me that cannot be done.

you think that you speak cleverly but through your screams you will say nothing clever.

I doubt it, sir.

by the way, how can you listen to Vaughn Williams and Darius Mihaud? haven't you heard of the Beatles?

oh, sir, everybody has heard of the Beatles.

don't you like them?

I don't dislike them.

do you dislike any singer?

singers can't be disliked.

then, any person who attempts to sing?

Frank Sinatra.

why?

he evokes a sick society upon a sick society.

do you read any newspapers?

only one.

which is?

OPEN CITY.

GUARD! TAKE THIS MAN TO THE TORTURE CHAMBERS IMMEDIATELY AND BEGIN PROCEEDINGS!

sir, a last request?

yes.

may I take my flower bowl with me?

no, I'm going to use it!

sir?

I mean, I am going to confiscate it. now, guard, take this idiot away! and guard come back with, come back with …

yes, sir?

a half dozen raw eggs and a couple of pounds of ground sirloin …

exit guard and prisoner. king leans forward, grins evilly as Vaughn Williams comes on over intercom. outside, the world moves forward as a lice-smitten dog pisses against a beautiful lemon tree vibrating in the sun.

Miriam and I had the little shack in the center, not bad, I had grown a run of sweetpeas out front, plus tulips all around. the rent was almost nothing and nobody bothered you on the drunks. you had to find the landlord to pay the rent and if you were a week or two late he'd say, "that's all right," he owned some automobile sales and repair outfit and had all the money he needed. "just don't give the money to my wife, she's a lush and I'm trying to slow her down." it seemed an easy time. Miriam was working. she typed for some big furniture company. I was unable to put her on the bus in the morning because I'd have a hangover, but me and the dog would always be waiting for her at the bus stop when she came on in. we had a car but she couldn't start the thing, and that made it nice for me. I'd wake up around 10:30, put myself together in a very leisurely way, check out the flowers, have a coffee, then a beer, then go out and stand in the sun and rub my belly, then I'd play with the dog, a big monster, bigger than me, and getting tired of that we'd go inside and I'd slowly straighten the place up a bit, make the bed, pick up the bottles, wash the dishes; another beer, check the refrigerator to make sure there was something for her dinner. by then it was time to start the car and make the race track. I could get back just in time to greet her at the bus stop. yes, it was getting good, and never having been much of a lady's man it felt good to be kept, even granted that it wasn't exactly Monte Carlo, and besides being the lover I had to do the dishes and other degrading tasks.

I felt it wasn't going to last, but meanwhile I was feeling better, looking better, talking better, walking better, sitting better, sleeping better, fucking better than ever before. it was nice, truly nice.

then it came about that I got to know the woman in the front, the one who lived in the big front house. I'd be sitting on the steps drinking my beer and throwing the ball for the dog and she'd come out and spread this blanket on the lawn and take a sunbath. she had on a bikini, just a couple of strips of stuff. "hi," I'd say. "hi," she'd say. it went on like that for some mornings. not much conversation. me, I had to be careful. there were neighbors everywhere and Miriam knew them all. but this woman had a BODY, gentlemen, every now and then nature or god or something decides to put together ONE BODY, just ONE for a change. you look at most bodies, you will find that the legs are too short or too long, or the arms; or the neck is too thick or too skinny, or the hips are too high or too low, and most important — the ass. the ass is almost always out of order, a disappointment: too big, too flat, too round, not round, or it hangs like a separate part, something stuck there when it was almost too late.

the ass is the face of the soul of sex.

this woman had an ass to go with all the rest. gradually I found out that her name was Renie and that she was a stripper in one of the small clubs on Western Ave. but her face was Los Angeles hard, world-hard. you got the feeling that she had been taken a few times, lied to and used by the rich boys when she was a bit younger, and now she had the guard up and screw you brother, I'm going to get mine.

one morning she told me, "I've got to sunbathe in back now. that old son of a bitch next door came by one day when I was out front and he pinched me, he copped a feel!"

"he did?"

"yeah, that old freak, he must be seventy years old and he pinched me. he's got money, he can keep his money. there's a guy brings his wife over there every day. he lets the old guy have her every day, they lay around and drink and screw, and then the husband comes and gets his wife in the evening. they think he's going to die and leave her the money. people make me sick. now down where I work, the guy who owns the place, big fat wop, Gregario, he says, 'baby, you work for me, you gotta go all the way, on stage, off stage.' I tell him, "look George, I'm an Artist, you don't like my act the way it is, I quit!' and I called a friend of mine and we packed all that gear out of there and I no sooner got home than the phone started ringing. it was Gregario. he tells me, 'look, honey, I gotta have you back! the place ain't the same, the place is dead. everybody's asking for you tonight. please come back, baby, I respect you as an Artist and a lady, you are a great lady!"

"care for a beer?" I asked her.

"sure."

I went inside and got a couple of beers and Renie got up on the porch steps and we drank.

"what do you do?" she asked.

"nothing right now."

"you've got a nice girl friend."

"she's o.k."

"what'd you do before you did nothing?"

"all bad jobs. nothing to talk about."

"I talked to Miriam. she says you paint and write, you're an artist."

"at rare times I'm an artist; at most other times I'm nothing."

"I'd like you to see my act."

"I don't like the clubs."

"I've got a stage in my bedroom."

"what?"

"come on, I'll show you."

we went in the back door and she sat me down in the bedroom. sure enough, here was this rather circular upraised stage. it took up most of the bedroom. there was a curtained area just off stage. she brought me a whiskey and water and then mounted the stage. she got in behind the curtains. I sat and sipped at my drink. then I heard music. "Slaughter on

Tenth Avenue.” the curtains parted. out she slank, gliding, gliding.

I finished my drink and decided I wouldn’t make the racetrack that day.

the clothing began to detach. she began to bump and grind. she’d left the whiskey by my side. I reached over and poured a bit of a shot, and she got on down to the little string with the beads on it. when she flipped the beads you saw the magic box. she ground it out, down to the last note. she was good.

“bravo! bravo!” I applauded.

she climbed on down and lit a cigarette.

“you really liked it?”

“sure. I know what Gregario means when he says you’ve got class.”

“all right, what’s he mean?”

“lemme have another drink.”

“sure. I’ll join you.”

“well, class is something you see, feel, rather than define, you can see it in men too, animals. you see it in some trapeze artists as they walk onto the arena. something in the walk, something in the manner. they have something inside AND outside, but it’s mostly inside and it makes the outside work. you do that when you dance; the inside makes the outside work.”

“yes, I feel that way too. it’s not just a sex-grind with me, it’s a feeling. I sing, I talk when I dance.”

“you sure as hell do. 1 caught all that.”

“but listen, I want you to criticize me, I want you to make suggestions, I want to improve. that’s why I have this stage, that’s why I practice. talk to me as I dance, don’t be afraid to say things.”

“o.k., a few more drinks and I’ll loosen up.”

“help yourself.”

she got back on stage, but behind the curtains. she came out with a different outfit on.

“when a New York baby says goodnight
it’s early in the morning

good night sweetheart.”

I had to talk loud over the music. I felt like a big-shot director with a sub-normal Hollywood brain.

“DON’T SMILE WHEN YOU COME OUT. THAT’S VULGAR. YOU’RE A LADY. YOU’RE GIVING THEM A BREAK BY BEING HERE. IF GOD HAD A CUNT YOU’D BE GOD, WITH A LITTLE MORE GENEROSITY. YOU’RE HOLY, YOU’VE GOT CLASS, LET THEM KNOW IT!”

I worked on the whiskey, found some cigarettes on the bed, started chain-smoking.

“THAT’S IT, THAT’S IT. YOU’RE ALONE IN A ROOM! NO AUDIENCE. YOU WANT LOVE THROUGH SEX, LOVE THROUGH AGONY!”

the parts of her costume began to fall away.

“NOW, NOW, SUDDENLY SAY SOMETHING! SAY IT AS YOU ARE WALKING AWAY FROM STAGE FRONT, HISS IT, HURL IT OVER YOUR SHOULDER, SAY ANYTHING THAT COMES TO YOUR HEAD, LIKE ‘POTATOS HURL MIDNIGHT ONIONS!’ ”

“potatoes hurl midnight onions!” she hissed.

“NO, NO! YOU SAY SOMETHING, MAKE IT YOURS!”

“chippy chippy suck nuts!” she hissed.

I almost made my rocks. more whiskey.

“NOW HIT IT, HIT IT! RIP OFF THAT GOD DAMNED STRING! LET ME SEE THE FACE OF ETERNITY!”

she did. the whole bedroom was on fire.

“NOW GET IT GOING FAST, FAST, LIKE YOU’VE LOST YOUR MIND, ABANDONED EVERYTHING!”

she did. for some moments I was speechless. the cigarette burned my fingers.

“BLUSH!” I screamed.

she blushed.

“NOW SLOW, SLOW, SLOW, MOVE IT TOWARD AND TO ME! SLOW, SLOW SLOW, YOU’VE GOT THE WHOLE TURKISH ARMY HARD! TOWARD ME, SLOW, OH JESUS!”

I was just about to leap on stage when she hissed, “chippy chippy suck nuts.”

then it was too late.

I had another drink, said goodbye to her, went to my place, bathed, shaved, washed the dishes, got the dog and just made it down to the bus stop.

Miriam was tired.

"what a day," she said. "one of those damn fool girls went around and oiled all the typewriters. they all stopped working. they had to call in the repair man. 'who the hell oiled these things?' he screamed at us. then Conners was on us to make up lost time, go get out those bills. my fingers are numb from hitting those silly ass keys."

"you're still looking good, baby. you get yourself a nice hot bath, a few drinks, you'll be straight. I've got frenchfries in the oven, plus we'll have cubesteaks and tomatoes, hot french bread with garlic."

"I'm so damned tired!"

she sat in a chair kicked off her shoes and I brought her a drink. she sighed and said, looking out front, "those sweetpea vines are beautiful with the sun coming through like that."

she was just a nice girl from New Mexico.

well, I saw Renie a few times after that but none of the times was like the first time, and we never made it together. first, I was trying to be careful on account of Miriam, and second I had built up such a thing about Renie being an Artist and a Lady that we both almost believed it ourselves. any sexual activity would have impaired the strictly impartial artist-critic relationship, and would have evolved into a possess-or-don't-possess hassle. actually it was a hell of a lot more fun and abnormal the other way. but it wasn't Renie who did me in. it was the little fat housewife of the garage mechanic in the back house. she came over to borrow some coffee or sugar or something about 10 a.m. one morning. she had on this loose dressing gown or whatever it was and she bent over to get the coffee or whatever from a low cupboard and the breasts fell out.

it was gross. she blushed, then stood up. I could feel heat everywhere. it was like being locked in with tons of energy that worked you at their will. the next thing I knew we were embracing as her husband rolled under some car on his little coaster and cursed and turned a greasy wrench. she was a fat little butterdoll. we made the bedroom and it was good. it seemed strange to see her going into the bathroom that Miriam always used. then she left. neither of us had said anything since her opening words, when she had asked to borrow whatever it was she wanted to borrow. me, probably.

it was about three nights later over drinks, Miriam said, "I heard about you screwing fatty out back."

"she's not really fat," I said.

"well, all right, but I can't have that, not when I'm working, anyhow. we're through."

"can I stay tonight?"

"no."

"but where will I go?"

"you can go to hell!"

"after all our times together?"

"after all our times together."

I tried working on her. it wasn't any good. she just got worse.

it was easy for me to pack. what I owned was rags that fit into half a paper suitcase. luckily I had a little money and I found a nice apartment on Kingsley Drive for a very reasonable rate. but I couldn't understand how Miriam had found out about Butterfat without being suspicious of Renie. then I put it together. they were all friends. they communicated, either directly or spiritually or in some way that women communicate to each other that men can't understand. add a little outside information to this and the poor man is finished.

sometimes driving down Western I would check the club billboard. there it was, Renie Fox. only she wasn't headlined. there was the name of the main stripper in bold neon and then below, Renie and one or two others. I never went in.

I saw Miriam one more time, outside a Thrifty Drugstore. she had the dog with her. he jumped all over me and I petted him and roughed him up.

"well, anyhow," I told her, "the dog misses me."

"I know he does. I brought him over to see you one night but before I could ring the bell I heard some bitch giggling in there. I didn't want to interrupt anything, so we left."

"you must have imagined the whole thing. there hasn't been anybody around."

"I didn't imagine anything."

"listen, I ought to drop around some night."

"no, don't. I have a nice boyfriend. he has a good job. he works! he's not afraid of WORK!"

and with that, they turned, woman and dog, and walked away from me and my life and my fears, wiggling their asses at me. then I stood and watched the people walking by. there was nobody there. I was at the corner. the signal was red. I watched. when it turned green I crossed the hard street.

---

one of my best friends — at least I consider him a friend — one of the finest poets of our Age is afflicted, right now, in London, with it, and the Greeks were aware of it and the Ancients, and it can fall upon a man at any age but the best age for it is the late forties working toward fifty, and I think of it as Immobility — a weakness of movement, an increasing lack of care and wonder; I think of it as The Frozen Man Stance, although it hardly is a STANCE at all, but it might allow us to view the corpse with SOME humor; otherwise the blackness would be too much. all men are afflicted, at times, with the Frozen Man Stance, and it is indicated best by such flat phrases as: "I just can't make it." or: "to hell with it all." or: "give my regards to Broadway." but usually they quickly recover and continue to beat their wives and hit the timeclocks.

but for my friend, The Frozen Man Stance is not to be thrown under the couch like a child's toy. if it only could be! he has tried the doctors of Switzerland, France, Germany, Italy, Greece, Spain and England and they could do nothing. one of them treated him for worms. another stuck tiny needles in his hands and neck and back, thousands of tiny needles. “this might be it,” he wrote me, “the needles might damn well do the trick.” in the next letter I heard that he was trying some Voodoo freak. in the next I heard that he wasn’t trying anything. the Final Frozen Man. one of the finest poets of our time, stuck there on top of his bed in a small and dirty London room, starving, barely kept alive by handouts; staring at his ceiling unable to write or utter a word, and not caring, finally, whether he does or not. his name is known throughout the world.

I could and can well understand this great poet’s flop in a barrel of shit, for, strangely, as long as I can remember, I was BORN into the Frozen Man Stance. one of the instances that I can recall is once when my father, a cowardly vicious brute of a man, was beating me in the bathroom with this long leather razor strap, or stop, as some call it. he beat me quite regularly; I was born out of wedlock and I believe he blamed me for all his troubles. he used to walk around singing, “oh when I was single, my pockets did jingle!” but he didn’t sing often. he was too busy beating me. for some time say before I reached the age of seven or eight, he almost imposed this sense of guilt upon me. for I could not understand why he beat me. he would search very hard for a reason. I had to cut his grass once a week, once lengthwise, then crosswise, then trim the edges with shears, and if I missed ONE blade of grass anywhere on the front or back lawns he beat the living shit-hell out of me. after the beating I would have to go out and water the lawns. meanwhile the other kids were playing baseball or football and growing up to be normal humans. the big moment would always come when the old man would stretch out on the lawn and put his eye level with the grassblades. he’d always manage to find one. “there, I SEE IT! YOU MISSED ONE! YOU MISSED ONE!” then he’d yell toward the bathroom window where my mother, a fine German lady, always stood about this time of the proceedings. “HE MISSED ONE! I SEE IT! I SEE IT!” then I’d hear my mother's voice: "ah, he MISSED one? ah, shame, SHAME!" I do believe that she blamed me for her troubles too. "INTO THE BATHROOM!" he'd scream. "INTO THE BATHROOM!" so I'd walk into the bathroom and the strap would come out and the beating would begin. but even though the pain was terrible, I, myself, felt quite out of it. I mean, that really, I was disinterested; it didn't mean anything to me. I had no attachment to my parents so I didn't feel any violation of love or trust or warmth. the hardest part was the crying. I didn't want to cry. it was dirty work, like mowing the lawn. like when they gave me the pillow to sit on afterwards, after the beating, after the watering of the lawn, I didn't want the pillow either, so, not wanting to cry, one day I decided not to. all that could be heard was the slashing of the leather strap against my naked ass. it had a curious and meaty and gruesome sound in the silence and I stared at the bathroom tiles. the tears came but I made no sound. he stopped beating. he usually gave me fifteen or twenty lashes. he stopped at a mere seven or eight. he ran out of the bathroom, "Mama, Mama, I think our boy is CRAZY, he don't cry when I whip him!" "you think he's crazy, Henry?" "yes, mama." "ah, too bad!"

it was only the first RECOGNIZABLE appearance of The Frozen Boy. I knew that there was something wrong with me but I did not consider myself insane. it was just that I could not understand how other people could become so easily angry, then just as easily forget their anger and become joyful, and how they could be so interested in EVERYTHING when everything was so dull.

I was not much good at sports or playing with my companions because I had very little practice at it. I was not the true sissy — I had no fear or physical delicacy, and, at times, I did anything and everything better than any of them — but just in spurts — it didn't somehow matter to me. when I got into a fist fight with one of my friends I could never get angry. I only fought as a matter of course. no other out. I was Frozen. I could not understand the ANGER and the FURY of my opponent. I would find myself studying his face and his manner, puzzled with it, rather than trying to beat him. every now and then I would land a good one to see if I could do it, then I would fall back into lethargy.

then, as always, my father would leap out of the house: "That's all! Fight's over. Finish. Kaput! Over!"

the boys were afraid of my father. they would all run away.

"You're not much of a man, Henry. You got beat again!"

I didn't answer.

"Mama, our boy let that Chuck Sloan beat him!"

"our boy?"

"yes, our boy."

"shame!"

I guess my father finally recognized the Frozen Man in me, but he took full advantage of the situation for himself. "Children are to be seen but not heard," he would exclaim. this was fine with me. I had nothing to say. I was not interested. I was Frozen. early, late, and forever.

I began drinking about 17 with older boys who roamed the streets and robbed gas stations and liquor stores. they thought my disgust with everything was a lack of fear, that my non-complaining was a soulful bravado. I was popular and I didn't care whether I was popular or not. I was Frozen. they set great quantities of whiskey and beer and wine in front of me. I drank them down. nothing could get me drunk, really and finally drunk. the others would be falling to the floor, fighting, singing, swaggering, and I would sit quietly at the table draining another glass, feeling less and less with them, feeling lost, but not painfully so. just electric light and sound and bodies and little more.

but I was still living with my parents and it was depression times, 1937, impossible for a 17 year old to get a job. I'd come back off the streets as much out of habit as out of reality. and knock at the door.

one night my mother opened the little window in the door and screamed: "he's drunk! he's drunk again!"

and I heard the great voice back in the room: “he’s drunk AGAIN?”

my father came to the little window: “I won’t let you in. you are a disgrace to your mother and your country.”

“it’s cold out here. open the door or I’ll break it down. I walked here to get in. that’s all there is to it.”

“no, my son, you do not deserve my house. you are a disgrace to your mother and your …”

I went to the back of the porch, lowered my shoulder and charged. there was no anger in my act or my movement, only a kind of mathematic — that having arrived at a certain figure you continue to work with it. I smashed into the door. it didn’t open but a large crack appeared right down the center and the lock appeared to be half-broken. I went back to the end of the porch, lowered my shoulder again.

“all right, come in,” said my father.

I walked in, but then the looks upon those faces, sterile blank hideous nightmare cardboard face-looks made my stomach full of booze lurch, I became ill, I unloaded upon their fine rug which was decorated with *The Tree of Life*. I vomited, plenty.

“you know what we do with a dog who shits on the rug?” my father asked.

“no,” I said.

“well, we stick his NOSE in IT! so he won’t do it NO MORE!”

I didn’t answer. my father came up and put his hand behind my neck. “you are a dog,” he said.

I didn’t answer. my father came up and put his hand behind my neck. “you are a dog,” he said.

I didn’t answer.

“you know what we do to dogs, don’t you?”

he kept pressing my head down, down toward my lake of vomit upon *The Tree of Life*.

“we stick their noses in their shit so they don’t shit no more, ever.”

there my mother, fine German lady, stood in her nightgown, watching silently. I always got the idea that she wanted to be on my side but it was an entirely false idea gathered from sucking her nipples at one time. besides, I didn't have a side.

"listen, father," I said, "STOP"

"no, no, you know what we do to a DOG!"

"I'm asking you to stop."

he kept pressing my head down, down, down, down. my nose was almost in the vomit. although I was the Frozen Man, Frozen Man also means Frozen and not melted. I simply could see no reason for my nose being pushed into my own vomit. if there had been a reason I would have pushed my nose there myself. it wasn't a matter of CARING or HONOR or ANGER, it was a matter of being pushed out of my particular MATHEMATIC. I was, to use my favorite term, disgusted.

"stop," I said, "I'm asking you, one last time, to stop!"

he pushed my nose almost against the vomit.

I swung from my heels, and I was down by my heels, I caught him with a full flowing and majestic uppercut, I caught him hard and full and very accurate upon the chin and he fell backwards heavily and clumsily, a whole brutal empire shot to shit, finally, and he fell into his sofa, bang, spread-armed, eyes like the eyes of a doped animal. animal? the dog had turned, I walked toward the couch, waiting for him to get up. he didn't get up. he just kept staring up at me. he would not get up. for all his fury, my father had been a coward. I was not surprised. then I thought, since my father is a coward, I am probably a coward. but being a Frozen Man, there wasn't any pain in this. it didn't matter, even as my mother began clawing my face with her fingernails, screaming over and over again, "you hit your FATHER! you hit your FATHER! you hit your FATHER!"

it didn't matter. and finally I turned my face full toward her and let her rip and scream, slashing with her fingernails, tearing the flesh from my face, the fucking blood dripping and jerking an sliding down my neck and my shirt, spotting the fucking *Tree of Life* with flecks and splashes and chunks of meat. I waited, no longer interested. "YOU HIT YOUR FATHER!" and then the slashes came lower. I waited. then they stopped.

then started again, one or two, “you … hit … your … father … your father …”

“have you finished?” I asked. I think the first words I had spoken to her outside of “yes” and “no” in ten years.

“yes,” she said.

“you go to the bedroom,” my father said from the couch. “I’ll see you in the morning. I’ll talk to YOU in the morning!”

yet HE was the Frozen Man in the morning, but I imagine, not out of choice.

I have often let shackjobs and whores slash my face as my mother did, and this is a most bad habit; being frozen does not mean let the jackals take control, and, besides, children and old women, and some strong men, now wince, as they see my face. but, to continue, and I do believe these Frozen Man tales interest me more than they do you (interest: a mathematical manner of tabulation), and I will try to cut them short. Christ. I think a very funny one (humor: a mathematical manner of tabulation. and I am serious in these things.) was the time I was in Los Angeles High School, say 1938? 1937?, around there? 1936? I joined the ROTC without any interest in army doings in the least. I had these huge grapefruit boils, immense, slugging out all over me and a boy had one of two choices, at this time, either join the ROTC or take gym. well, really all the decent good guys were in gym. the shits and freaks and madmen, like me, the Frozen Men, what there were of them, were taking ROTC. war was not yet a humane thing. Hitler was just a gibberish Charlie Chaplin doing funny idiot things on RKO-Pathe News.

I went ROTC because in an army uniform they couldn’t see my boils; in a tracksuit they could, plenty. now, get me, it wasn’t my boils to ME that mattered, it was my BOILS toward THEM. it would upset their glands. with a man in a cave, a Frozen Man such as myself, boils don’t matter, what makes them matter are things that don’t count — like masses of common people. being

Frozen does not mean being unrealistic; being Frozen means to remain Frozen; all else is madness.

be fucked with as little as possible so you may enter wherever you are meant to enter. so I didn’t want to be fucked with by the stares of the human eye upon my disjointed boils. so I clothed myself in military uniform to cut down the x-rays. but I didn’t want the ROTC. I was FROZEN.

so, here we are, one day, the whole god damned battalion or whatever you call it, and I am still a private and the whole school is in some type of manual of arms competition, the grandstands are packed with fools and here we stand, going through the movements, and it’s hot and I’m FROZEN, man, I don’t care, and here we follow these orders, and soon only fifty per cent of us are left and soon only twenty-five per cent and soon only ten per cent, and I’m still standing there, these big red ugly boils on my face, no uniform for the face, and it’s hot hot, and I’m trying to get my mind to think, make a mistake make a mistake make a mistake, but I am automatically a master craftsman, there is nothing I can do badly even tho I don’t care, but I can’t force error and that TOO is because I am FROZEN! and soon there are only two people left, me and my buddy Jimmy. well, Jimmy is a shit and he NEEDS this thing, it will be nice for him. this is what I actually thought. but Jimmy fucked up. it was on the command, “Order Arms!” no, it went like this, “Order …” then, pause … “Arms!” I don’t any longer remember the proper maneuver to this order, being a lousy soldier. it had something to do with the jamming of the bolt into the breech. but Jimmy, who cared and was loved by many or at least liked, Jimmy fucked up with the bolt. and there I was standing alone, boils bulging out over my itchy olive drab woolen collar, boils leaping out all over my skull, even on the top of my head in the hair, and it was hot in the sun and there I stood, disinterested, neither happy or sad, nothing, just nothing. the beautiful girls moaned in the stands for their poor Jimmy and his mother and father put their heads down, not understanding how it could have happened. I too managed to think, poor Jimmy. but that was as far as I could think. the old man running the ROTC was somebody called Col. Muggett, a man who had spent his entire career in the Army. he came up to place the medal upon my itchy shirt, his face was very sad, very. he thought me a misfit, the kid with the empty head, and I thought of him as insane. he pinned the medal on me and then reached to shake my hand. I took his hand and smiled. a good soldier never smiles. the smile meant to tell him that I understood things had gone wrong and that it was beyond me. then I marched back to my company, my squad, my platoon, my whatever the hell. then the Lt. called us to attention. Jimmy’s last name was Hadford or something like that. and you ain’t gonna believe this but it happened. the Lt. said to the men: “I wish to congratulate Private Hadford for coming so close in the manual of arms competition.”

then: “at ease!”

then: *“fall* out!” or “company dismissed!” or some god damned thing.

I saw the other boys talking to Jimmy. nobody said anything to me. then I saw Jimmy’s mother and father come out of the stands and put their arms around him. my parents were not there. I walked off the grounds and into the streets. I took the medal off and walked along holding it in my hand. then without rancor, fear, joy, without anger or direct reason, I threw the medal down a sewer drain outside a drugstore. Jimmy was some years later shot down over the English Channel. his bomber was badly hit and he ordered his men to bail out while he tried to nurse his plane back to England. he never made it. about that time I was living in Philadelphia as a 4-F and I screwed a 300-pound whore who looked like a giant pig and she broke all four legs of my bed, bouncing and sweating and farting during the action.

I might go on and on, giving incidents within The Frozen Man context. it is not quite true that I never CARE or that I never anger or that I never hate or that I never hope or that I never have joy. I do not mean to infer that I am ENTIRELY without passions or feelings or whatever; it is only strange to me that my feelings, my thoughts, my ways are so strangely different and opposite of my fellow man. I can seemingly never get WITH them, hence I am frozen out both by their choice and my way. please stay awake and let me finish this off with a letter, a letter from my poet friend in London who describes his experiences as a Frozen Man. he wrote me: "… i'm in this fishbowl, you understand, a vast aquarium & my fins are not strong enough to get around in this big undersea city. i do what i can, tho the magic is surely gone. i just can't seem as yet to pull myself together out of this cold turkey state & get the 'inspiration,' no writing, no fucking, no damn nothing. can't drink, can't eat, can't turn on. just cold turkey. so the gloom, but nothing seems to work just now. it's going to be a long period of hibernation, a long dark night. i'm used to the sun, to the mediterranean brightness & dazzle, to living on the damn edge of the volcano, as in greece, where at least there was light, there were people, was even what is called love. now, nothing. middle-aged faces. young faces that mean nothing, that pass, smile, say hello. oh, cold gray darkness. old poet stuck in the sticks. the styx. the stinks. from doctors to hospitals, with shit specimens, piss specimens, & always the same reports — liver tests & pancreas tests abnormal: but nobody knows what to do, only i know. there is nothing to do but to snap out of this jungle, & meet some mythical young beauty — some sweet domestic thing who will take care of me, make few demands, be warm & quiet, not say too much. where is she? i couldn't damn well give her what she wants, or could i??? it's just possible, of course, that this is all i need. but how, where to find it? i wish i were tough. i'd be able to sit down & begin all over again, from scratch, getting it down on paper, stronger, cleaner, sharper than ever. but something has gone out of me right now, and i'm temporizing, stalling for time. the sky is black & pink and flushed at 4:40 in the afternoon. the city roars outside. the wolves are pacing in the zoo. the tarantulas are squatting beside the scorpions. the queen bee is served by the drones. the mandril snarls viciously, hurling filthy bananas & apples from its crotch at the crazy kids who taunt it. if i'm going to die, i want to come out to california, below l.a., far down the coast, on the beach somewhere, near Mexico. but that's a dream. i'd want to do that somehow. but all the letters I get from the states are from poets & writers who have been here, on this side of the Atlantic, & they tell me how rotten it is back home, what a nasty scene, etc. i don't know, i could never swing it, financially, since my backers are here, and they'd abandon me if i returned, as they more or less like to keep in closer contact with me. yes, the body gives, but hang on, and forgive the deadly dullness of this letter. i can't get inspired, i can't get worked up. i just look at doctor's bills, & other bills, & the black sky, the black sun. maybe something will change, soon … that's the way it is. tra la la, let's face it without tears. cheers, friend." Signed "X" (A well-known poet … editor).

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well, my friend from London says it much better than I, but how well, how very well I know of what he speaks. and a worldful of energetic hustlers with their minds shaken awry with the pace would only condemn us for sloth or a kind of disgraceful laziness or self-pity. but it isn't any of these things. only the man frozen in the cage can know it. but we'll damn well have to go out of our way and wait. and wait for what? so, cheers, friends. even a dwarf can get a hard-on, and I am Mataeo Platch and Nichlos Combatz at the same time, and only Marina, my small girlchild, can bring light at the highest noon, for the sun will not speak. and up in the plaza between the terminal annex and the union station the old men sit in a circle and watch the pigeons, sit in a circle for hours and watch the pigeons and watch nothing. frozen, but I could cry. and at night we will sweat through senseless dreams. there's only one place to go. tra la la la. la la. la.

I met her in a bookstore. she was wearing a very short tight skirt, enormous highheels, and her breasts were quite evident even under the loose-fitting blue sweater. her face was very pointed, austere, no make-up, with a lower lip that didn't seem to hang quite right. but with a body like that you could forgive quite a number of things. but it was very odd that she didn't have some great protective bull looming about. then I saw her eyes — christ, they seemed to have no pupils — just this deep deep flash of darkness. I stood there watching her bend over again and again. reaching down for books, or stretching up. the short skirt lifting to show me fat and magic thighs. she was running through books on mysticism. I put down my *How To Beat the Horses* book and walked over. "pardon me," I said, "I am drawn as if my magnet. I fear it is your eyes." I lied.

"fate is God," she said.

"you are God, You are my Fate," I answered. "can I buy you a drink?"

"sure."

we went to the bar next door and stayed there until closing time. I talked her kind of talk, figuring it was the only way. it was. I got her to my place and she was a beautiful lay. our courtship lasted about 3 weeks. when I asked her to marry me she looked at me a long time. she looked at me for so long that I thought she had forgotten the question.

finally she spoke: "well, all right. but I don't love you. I only feel that I must … marry you. if it were only love, I would refuse love, only. for you see … it … wouldn't turn out very well, yet, what must be must be."

"o.k., sweetums," I said.

after we got married all the short skirts and highheels vanished and she went about in this long red corduroy gown down to her ankles. it was not a very clean gown. and she wore torn blue slippers with it. she'd go out in the street this way, to the movies, everywhere. and especially during breakfast she'd like to dangle the arms of the gown into her buttered toast.

"hey!" I'd say, "you're getting butter all over yourself!"

she wouldn't answer. she'd look out the window and say: "OOOOOOOH! a bird! a bird there in the tree! did you SEE the bird?"

"yeh."

or: "OOOOOOOH! a SPIDER! look at the dear God's creature! I just love spiders! I can't understand people who hate spiders! do you hate spiders, Hank?"

"I really don't think much about them."

there were spiders all over the place, and bugs, and flies and roaches. God's creatures. she was a terrible housekeeper. she said housekeeping didn't matter. I thought that she was simply lazy. and, I was beginning to think, a bit goofy. I had to hire a fulltime maid, Felica. my wife's name was Yevonna.

one night I came home and I found them both smearing some kind of ointment on the backs of mirrors, waving their hands over them and saying strange words. they both leaped up with their mirrors, screamed, ran off and hid them.

"Jesus Christ," I said, "what's going on around here?"

"no one's eye must fall upon the magic mirror but one's own," said my wife Yevonna.

"that's right," said the maid, Felica. but Felica had stopped cleaning house. she said it didn't matter. but I had to keep her because she was almost as good on the springs as Yevonna, and, besides, she was a good cook, though I was never quite sure what she was feeding me.

while Yevonna was pregnant with our first child, it was brought to my attention that she was acting odder than ever. she kept having these crazy dreams and she told me that a demon was trying to take up residence. inside her. she described the mother to me. the cat appeared to her in two forms. one of them was a man very much like myself. the other was a creature with a human face, a cat's body and eagle's legs and talons and bat's wings. the thing never spoke to her but she got strange ideas while looking at it. the strange idea she got was that I was responsible for her misery, and created in her an overwhelming urge to destroy. not roaches or flies or ants or filth gathered in corners — but things that had cost me money. she tore up the furniture, ripped down the shades, burned the curtains and couch, threw toilet paper across the room, let the bathtub overflow and swamp the whole place, ran up huge long distance calls to people she barely knew. when she got like that, all I could do was go to bed with Felica, try to forget, go 3 or 4 rounds using all the tricks in the book.

I finally got Yevonna to go to a psychiatrist. she said, “surely, and very well, but it’s all nonsense. it’s all in your mind: you are both the demon and YOU are insane!”

“all right, baby, but let’s go see the man, huh?”

“sit out in the car. I’ll be right out.”

I waited. when she came out she had on a short skirt, high heels, new nylons, and even makeup. she had combed her hair for the first time since our marriage.

“give me a kiss, baby,” I said, “I got rocks.”

“no. let’s go see the psychiatrist.”

with the psychiatrist she couldn’t have acted any more normal. she didn’t mention the demon. she laughed at stupid jokes and never rambled on, always letting the doctor take the lead. he declared her physically healthy and mentally sound. I knew she was physically healthy. we drove back and then she ran into the house and changed from her short skirt and heels back into her filthy red gown. I went back to bed with Felica.

even after our first child was born (mine and Yevonna’s), Y. continued to believe completely in the demon, and he kept on appearing to her. schizophrenia developed. one moment she was quiet and tender; then in another moment she became a slouch, garrulous, dull, inconsiderate and rather mean.

and he’d just start on, rambling and chattering, none of it tying together.

sometimes she would be standing in the kitchen and I would hear this ugly bellow, very loud, it was like a man’s voice, very hoarse.

I’d go in and ask her, “whatzup, sweets?”

“well, I’ll be a dirty motherfucker,” I’d say. then I’d pour myself a big drink, go into the front room and sit down.

one day I managed to sneak a psychiatrist into the house when she was in an off mood. he agreed that she was in a psychotic state and advised me to have her committed to an institution for the insane. I signed the necessary papers and obtained a hearing. once again, out came the short skirt and heels. only this time she didn't play the dull and ordinary broad. she turned on the intellectualism. she spoke brilliantly in defense of her sanity. she made me out as a mean husband who was trying to unload a wife. she managed to discredit the testimony of several witnesses. she confused two court physicians. the judge, after consulting the physicians, said: "The Court does not find the evidence sufficient to commit Mrs. Radowski. This hearing is therefore dismissed."

I drove her on home and waited while she changed back into her filthy red gown. when she came back out I told her, "god damn if you're not going to drive ME nuts!"

"you ARE insane," she said. "now why don't you go to bed with Felica and attempt to rid yourself of your repressions?"

I did just that. this time Y. watched, standing by the bed, smiling, smoking a king-size cigarette out of an ivory holder. maybe she had attained her final cool. I rather enjoyed it.

but the next day, coming home from work, the landlord met me in the driveway: "Mr. Radowski! Mr. Radowski, your wife, your WIFE has been picking quarrels and fights with the neighbors. she's broken every window in your place. I'll have to ask you to move!"

well, we packed up and, myself and Yevonna and Felica, and we went to Yevonna's mother's place in Glendale. the old gal was pretty well fixed but all the incantations and magic mirrors and incense-burning got her down, so she suggested we go to a farm she owned up near Frisco. we left the baby at her mother's and off we went, but when we got there the main house was occupied by a sharecropper, some big guy with a black beard stood in the door, one Final Benson, that's what he said his name was and he said, "I been on this land all my life, and no man moves me off, NO man!" he was six-five and close to 350 pounds and not too old, so we rented a place just off the edge of the land while legal maneuvers began.

it was the very first night, it happened. I was packing it to Felica, trying the new bed, when I heard terrible moans, sobs from the other rooms, and sounds as if the front room couch were breaking. "Yevonna sounds disturbed," I said. I slipped it out. "be right back."

she was disturbed, all right. there was Final Benson riding her, packing it home. it was awesome. he had enough for four men. I went back to the bedroom and did my little bit.

in the morning, I couldn't find Yevonna. "wonder where that dizzy broad's gone?"

it wasn't until Felica and I were having breakfast that I looked out the window and saw Yevonna. she was down on her hands and knees in these blue jeans and a man's olive drab shirt and she was working the land, and Final was right down there with her and they were pulling things up, putting them in baskets. looked like turnips. Final had got himself a woman. "jesus christ," I said, "let's go. let's get out of here, fast!"

Felica and I packed. when we got back to L.A. we took a motel room while we looked for a place. "god damn, sweetie," I said, "my worries are over! you have no idea what I've been through!"

we bought a fifth of whiskey to celebrate, then we made love and stretched out to sleep in peace.

then I was awakened by the sound of Felica's voice: "Thou foul tormenting fiend!" she was saying. "Is there no rest from thee this side of the tomb? Thou has taken away my Yevonna, and now thou has followed me here! Get thee hence, Demon! Get out! Leave us Forever!"

I sat up in bed. I looked where Felica was looking and I think I saw it — this big face, kind of a red glowing with a bit of orange under it, like a hot coal, and green lips, and two long yellow teeth sticking out, a mass of dull glowing hair, and the thing was grinning. the eyes looked down at us like a dirty joke.

"well, I'll be a dirty motherfucker," I said.

"begone!" spoke Felica, "in the Holy Name of Almighty Ja and in the name of Buddha and in the name of a thousand gods I curse and direct and discharge you from our souls forever and ten thousand years hence!"

I switched on the electric light.

"it was just the whiskey, baby. very bad whiskey, plus tiredness from the long drive down here."

I looked at the clock. it was one thirty p.m. and I needed a drink now, pretty bad. I started to get dressed.

"where you going, Hank?"

"liquor store. just time to make it. gotta drink that big face outa my head. too damn much."

I was finished dressing.

"Hank?"

"yeah, sweetzums?"

"something I ought to tell you."

"sure, sweetzums. but snap it up. gotta make the store and get back."

"I'm Yevonna's sister."

"oh yeh?"

"yes."

I leaned over and kissed her. then I went outside and got in my car and started driving. away. I got the bottle at Hollywood and Normandie and just kept driving west. the motel was back east, almost to Vermont Ave. Well, you don't find a Final Benson everyday, not with all that string, sometimes you just have to leave those crazy broads and get yourself back together. there's a certain price on pussy that no man will pay; meanwhile, there's always another fool who will pick up the one you've dropped, so there's really no sense of guilt or desertion.

I stopped at a kind of hotel down near Vine Street and got myself a room. while I was getting my key I saw this thing sitting in the lobby with her skirt pulled up around her ass. too much. she kept looking at the bottle in the bag. I kept looking up her ass. too much. when I got on the elevator she was on there with me. “you gonna drink that bottle all by yourself, mister?” “I hope I don’t have to.” “you won’t.” “fine,” I said.

the elevator hit the top floor. she swung out and I watched her movements, shimmering and sliding; shaking and jolting me all through.

“the key says room 41,” I said.

“o.k.”

“by the way, you ain’t interested in mysticism, flying saucers, etheric armies, witches, demons, occult teachings, magic mirrors?”

“iner-ested in WHAT? I don’t get it!”

“forget it, baby!”

she moved along in front of me, high heels clicking, her body wobbling all over in the dim hall light. I couldn’t wait. we found room 41 and I opened the door, found the light, found 2 glasses, rinsed them, poured the whiskey, handed her a glass. she sat on the couch, her legs crossed high, smiling at me over the drink.

it was going to be all right.

at last.

for a while.

ALSO AVAILABLE

More Notes of a Dirty Old Man

The Uncollected Columns
Edited by David Calonne
Available in paperback or e-edition

"In these pieces, written for the alternative press from 1967 through the mid-'80s, is a Bukowski you might not know—the father taking his seven-year-old daughter to the beach in Santa Monica, where he rescues a homeless man who's been beaten up by thugs. Here's the Bukowski lost in the gender wars, confused and trying to keep his own desire (piggy at times, yes) alive. He wasn't looking for beauty, but he found it now and then." — *Los Angeles Magazine*

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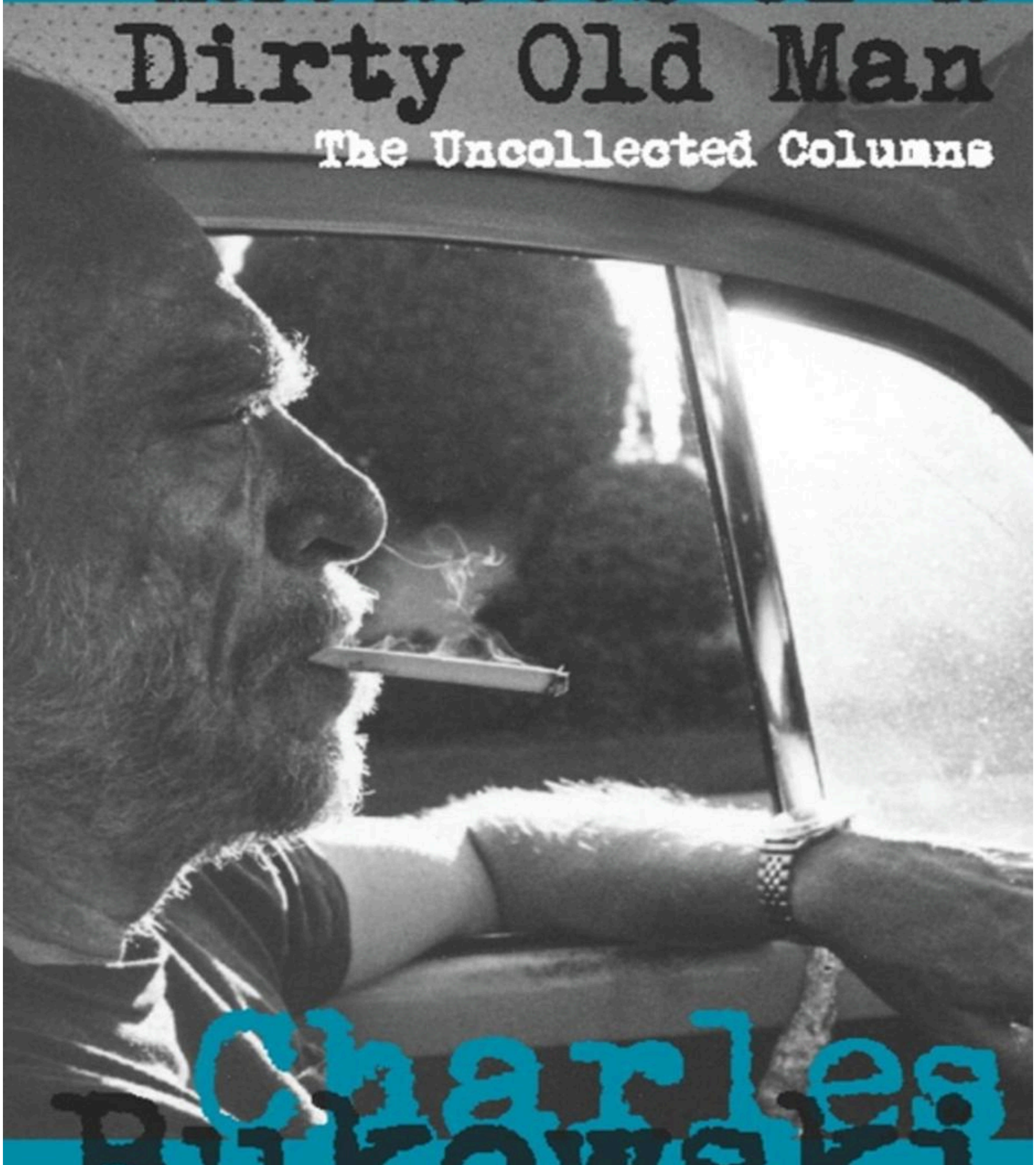

Charles Bukowski

Edited, with an Afterword, by David Stephen Calonne

More Notes of a Dirty Old Man

The Uncollected Columns

Charles Bukowski

Edited, with an Afterword,
by David Stephen Calonne

City Lights Books • San Francisco

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MORE NOTES OF A DIRTY OLD MAN

God knows I am not too hippy. Perhaps because I am too much around the hip and I fear fads for, like anybody else, I like something that tends to last. Then, too, the hippy foundation or diving board or resting place or whatever you want to call it does suck in its fair share of fakes, promoters and generally vicious people trying to overcompensate for some heinous psychological defect. But you have these everywhere—hippy and non-hippy. But, like I say, the few people that I know are either a bit on the side of the artistic, the pro-hip or the understanding-hip, so I have been generally getting more of this slice of cake and it has seemed a bit SWEET.

But, lo, the other day I got the OTHER bit and I think I'd rather eat sweet than shit. Being locked into a large building where 4,000 people work at dull and menial tasks has its compensations but it has disadvantages too—for instance, you can never be sure who is going to assigned to work next to you. A bad soul makes for a worse night. Enough bad souls can kill you.

He was balding, square-jawed, mannish???, with this look of hate-frustration upon his face. For months I had sensed that he had wanted to talk to me. Now I was hooked—he was assigned to the place to my left. He complained about the air-conditioning and a few other things, then worked in a question about my age. I told him that I would be 47 in August. He said he was 49.

"Age is only relative," he said. "It doesn't matter if you are 47 or 49, it doesn't make any difference."

"Umm," I said.

Then the speaker screamed out some announcement: ALL THOSE QUALIFIED ON THE L.S.M. MACHINES REPORT TO . . .

"I thought they were going to say LSD," he said.

"Umm," I said.

"You know," he said, "that LSD has put a lot of people in madhouses—brain damage."

"Everything puts people in madhouses."

"Whatcha mean?"

"I mean the LSD brain damage scare is probably an exaggeration percentage-wise."

“Oh no, leading doctors and laboratories and hospitals say so.”

“O.K.”

We worked away without conversation for awhile and I thought I had escaped him. He had one of those easy mellow voices that drowned and warbled in its own conviction. But he began again:

“Are you for LSD?”

“I don’t use it.”

“Don’t you think it’s a passing fad?”

“Nothing that is against the law ever ceases to exist.”

“Whatcha mean?”

“Forget it.”

“Whatcha think of the hippies?”

“They don’t harm me.”

“Their hair stinks,” he said. “They don’t take baths. They don’t work.”

“I don’t like to work either.”

“Anything that is unproductive is not good for society.”

“Umm.”

“Some college profs say that these kids are our new leaders, that we should listen to them. HOW THE HELL CAN THEY KNOW ANYTHING? THEY DON’T HAVE ANY EXPERIENCE.”

“Experience can dull. With most men experience is a series of mistakes; the more experience you have the less you know.”

“You mean to say you are going to listen to what some 13-year-old kid tells you?”

“I listen to everything.”

“But they aren’t mature, they aren’t MATURE, don’t you see? That’s why they’re hippies.”

“Suppose they got jobs? Suppose they went into industry, went to work turning bolts for General Motors? Wouldn’t they still be immature?”

“No, because they’d be working,” he said.

“Umm.”

“Furthermore, I think a lot of these kids are going to be SORRY that they didn’t go to the war. It’s going to be an experience they’ll wish they hadn’t missed. They’re going to regret it later on.”

“Umm.”

There fell again the peaceful silence. Then he said, “you’re not a hippy, are you?”

“I’m working, damn it. And I told you I was 47.”

“The beard doesn’t mean anything then, does it?”

“Sure it does. It means, at the moment, I feel better wearing a beard than I do the other way. Maybe next week it will be different.”

Silence, silence. Then he switched his stool, turned his back to me as much as possible and continued working. I got up and walked to the men’s crapper and stuck my head out the window for fresh air. The guy was my father all over again: RESPONSIBILITY, SOCIETY, COUNTRY, DUTY, MATURITY, all the dull-sounding hard words. But why were they in such agony? Why did they hate so much? It seemed simply that they were very much afraid that somebody else was having a damn good time or was not unhappy most of the time. It seemed that they wanted everybody to carry the same damn heavy rock they were carrying. It wasn’t ENOUGH that I was working beside him like an idiot; it wasn’t enough for him that I was wasting the few good hours left in my life—no, he also wanted me to share his own mind-soul, to sniff his dirty stockings, to chew on his angers and hates with him. I was not PAID for that, the fucker. And that’s what killed you on the job—not the actual physical work but being closed in with the dead.

I got on back to my stool. He had his back turned to me. Poor, poor fellow. I had let him down. He’d have to look elsewhere. And I was white and he was white and most of them were black. Where ya gonna find a decent white man in a place like this? I could sense him thinking.

I suppose he would have gotten around to the Negro question if I had sent out the proper rays. I had been spared that.

His back was to me. His back was broad, American and hard. But I couldn’t see his face and he didn’t speak any more. What had hurt him worst was that I had neither agreed with or argued with him. His back was to me. The remainder of the night was peaceful and almost kind.

Tucson, Arizona, 6-29-67

Sitting in a country store that went broke, sitting at last after getting out Henry Miller's *Order and Chaos Chez Hans Reichel,* one year's work, putting the thing together piece by piece, magic by magic, held up by lack of funds and a praying, quivering, shaking 8x12 Chandler & Price, 50 or 60 years old, that fell apart on the last page; sitting there a moment, moulding their next move, hoping there is enough money for a next move are Jon and Louise (Gypsy Lou) Webb, who wrought the miracle of this third book out of LOUJON PRESS—which already has won awards in Typography, Type Direction & Design in TDC's 13th annual awards show in New York City.

Sitting here now behind an abandoned store front of crumbling adobe—they call it their "desert workshop printery"—they are almost broke.

It is Tucson and I am down here interviewing Jon Webb in 105 heat, and you know that Art can come from anywhere: the center of hot hell and the ghosts of old bean cans. I begin the interview:

"Both of you are great editors and bookmakers. Loujon Press is up there with the gods with your books and the Outsider Magazine. Your Miller book is perhaps the most revolutionary piece of bookmaking in the past several hundred years. My question is, do you think that you will be able to survive or will the walls fall in and eliminate you?"

Jon: We'll survive, but the walls suddenly will fall in, they always do, same as they did on Alan Swallow—tho we don't put ourselves up in his area of greatness, we're far from it."

Buk: "O.K., so, well where did the idea ever begin to become editors of this sort?"

Jon: "I gave up writing after two or three million published words because I felt that I'd never make it creatively, that I'd never get published without making compromises of some sort. Of course, that could have been an excuse for laziness or inadequacy—but I'm convinced I made a good move, from writing into publishing. I think I'm a better editor than I was a writer. If I keep going, tho, I'll only get into a morass of rationalizations."

Buk: "Fair enough. Let's leap into something else: the inflation spiral on paper, ink, type, everything from hamburgers to paperclips has, in a sense, become ridiculous. Don't you feel that after finishing one project that the next one has become almost priced out of reach?"

Jon: “I was pretty ignorant at this business when I started but I learned to become an honest con-man, meaning I’ve given in to developing cordial relationships with businessmen—the ones who sell me these things at such high prices. I simply con them into thinking my small order is only a sampler, the first part of a huge order, and in so doing lay the groundwork for a deal, which in business parlance means getting a cut in price. In other words, I talk in carloads until they quote me carload prices. It’s a dirty approach, but the fact I have to wear a starched collar and conservative necktie to put the approach over sort of cancels in my mind the dirtiness out of it.”

Buk: “I agree. Now, all of your work is done by the two of you. Breaking down your total profit and dividing the hours worked, what do you judge your hourly wage, per person, to be?”

Jon: “If it turns out there is a profit—we call anything above cost profit—our net income for hours worked so far has never exceeded 8 cents an hour.”

Buk: “Is it worth it? Wouldn’t you rather be picking beets or selling Fuller brushes door to door? And how about those editing and design offers from New York publishers? Don’t you ever get tired of the hard road?”

Jon: “No, we work out of a compulsion, same as I always did when writing. It’s a love that’s transferred, that’s all. Just like when a loved one dies, the idea of writing died too. I simply transferred the love for writing to the love for publishing. I could go on but I would only get increasingly flip. Because the reason any of us are in a work that is economic suicide can’t logically be articulated upon without getting into a bragging—like calling oneself an artist. I think we’re artists, but it could be everything we’re doing that’s good is just accidental. We’ve still a long way to go.”

Buk: “All right, fair enough. But now let’s talk about ‘angels’. Where are the angels? I know that they DO exist. For instance, there is a poet in Europe, an American exile, not overly exceptional who is supported by some rich folk who rarely ask questions or slug him with demands and he is simply not that good. Frankly, I think you deserve an angel or 2 or 3. Do you think that yours will ever appear?

Jon: “Everybody who buys our books are angels. But getting back into the meat of it, you have to go after angels and we haven’t had the time. We will eventually put on a big promotion for an angel. A good angel. We’ve had lots of offers from bad angels, the ones with strings attached. Like the rich widow in Louisiana who owns 4,000 acres of bottom land that's zooming in value because the Northern manufacturers are coming in. She offered us 40 acres plus a plantation house if we published her True Story Magazine style book under our Loujon Press imprint. Book was about her discovery after her husband's death that he once had a mistress. This book she wrote was an unending lambasting of him, hoping to turn him over in his grave. Broke our hearts, but we had to turn her down."

Buk: "Is the Miller book moving?"

Jon: "How could a Miller book not move?"

Buk: "I mean fast. How can we let people know that if they see these books with their eyes they will buy them? How can we let people know that these books you do will be collector's items selling for 5 or 10 times their publication price in 4 or 5 years, or less?"

Jon: "We're not much interested in selling to those people, the ones we have to let know these books we do are eventual collectors' pieces. But a lot of those people buy our books, and without knowing it are angels of a sort. So we love them, they help us keep going."

Buk: "Very true. But these formats you use that scream collectors' item at one look, what's behind them?

Jon: "Behind them is the fact that all rules of book publishing have come to a deadend, especially in design. All we're doing with our mixed-up formats is fumbling for a way out of that deadend, or past it. If we don't get past it we'll get out of this work, same as I got out of writing—and into something else. Like maybe underground filmmaking.

"But getting back to design, I believe with McLuhan that the medium is the message. And it has been our good luck, so far, to publish writers who will let us dress them up in our particular types of format, our packaging. So far, in the books we've done it hasn't hurt either of us."

Buk: "Have basic type styles changed? How do you select your types?"

Jon: "By eye. The more you pore over books of typefaces, type samples, so forth, the more type you might tend to like, and after weeks of studying you end up picking a certain typeface, cable some far-away country and you get a reply that that particular typeface has not been cast for 20 or 30 years, so you begin all over again. This happens mostly because, in our opinion, type design has also come to a deadend. So you start going back into time to find something good. You can't do that with book design, because you can't create new book design by copying the old masters at it. But type is okay to copy. It's merely one of the tools you work with to create."

Buk: "How do you decide on publishing a book?"

Jon: "It's rough, but mostly it's a case of love, of the work to be published, and the writer too. Because around that work, also the writer, you have to work months creating a format which fits that writer. Not one that fits us, that's silly. The whole format has to be an extension of both the writer's personality and the work of his we're publishing. And you'd get nowhere there without a love involved for the writer embodied in his talent. People say we must love our work. We don't. Work always is pretty drab, if it isn't just plain hell. But we love what comes out of the work. And when it's done, there's another hell in which we have to transfer the love for a book just done to the next one in line. To the next writer in line. Queer, eh?"

Buk: "Hell, no. But go on, what is the ultimate you would like to do in book design?"

Jon: "Well, if I'm constantly mulling over an elusive idea, Gypsy is too. It's to put out a book of great beauty and original design with which the buyer immediately falls in love and which is certain to become a top value collector's item, but which on opening and reading to the last page suddenly falls apart in the reader's hands, virtually disintegrates, and can in no way be put back together again."

Buk: "I get you. The buyer will buy another book at once to see if the same thing happens with the second copy."

Jon: "That isn't the reason for it, no. But you've given me an idea—thanks."

Buk: "Whatever the reason, seems like a dirty trick on the writer. All his work and yours too shot to hell forever."

Jon: "Oh, I'd first find a writer who didn't mind, be sure of that. Like you maybe."

Buk: "Come to think of it, I probably wouldn't mind. Might be fun writing for a posterity that disintegrated in the reader's hands instead of his brain. But space is running out. Any final good word to the reader of this column or any readers anywhere?"

Jon: "Well, even the broadside announcement on the Miller book, printed on Parchment paper, 19 by 25 inches, is now a collector's item. But we'll mail one to anybody who sends us a postcard, and we’ll go the postage. Our address is 1009 East Elm, Tucson, Arizona 85719. LOUJON PRESS.”

Buk: “How come it’s so damned hot down here in June and July?”

Jon: “I don’t know, but it’s the next best thing to hell. That’s probably why we’re here.”

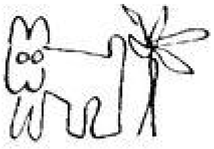
Buk: “I think this interview is over.”

Jon: “Me, too.”

Buk: “You got anymore beer?”

Jon: “We knew you were coming by.”

Bukowski goes out into the kitchen of the Desert Workshop Printery and gets one. The interview is over. The great poet Bukowski and the great editor Webb sit across from each other, looking in and out and over with glazed and perhaps? immortal spirits. Life goes on anyhow.



I was going over my old *Racing Forms*, having a beer and a smoke, really hungover, shaky, depressed; gently thinking suicide but still hoping for a lucky angel when there was a knock on the door, a very light knock, I barely heard it. I listened and there it was again. I hid my bag of Chesterfields under the fireplace and opened the door just a slit. “Bukowski?” said the voice. “Charles Bukowski?” and there was this woman standing out in a light rain, in the 9 p.m. rain between 2 dying plants on the front porch of the front court in which I lived, badly, among beer, and mouse-shadows, and old copies of Upton Sinclair and Thomas Wolfe and Sinclair Lewis, and I looked out looked out looked out and IT WAS A WOMAN and WHAT a woman in that 9 p.m. rain—long red hair all down the back, jesus: tons of red miracle. And the face, open with passion, like a flower ripped open with the fingers from the bud, a kind of fire-cheating, and the body, the body was nothing but SEX, sex standing still jumping singing looking flowing humming in the 9 p.m. rain saying, “Bukowski, Charles Bukowski?” and I said, “Come on in,” and she did, she came in and sat on the chair in front of the fireplace and the walls of the room began to weave in and out like on a trip, and the rug said, what the hell oh my god oooh oooooooooooh, and she CROSSED HER LEGS and the skirt was high and I looked up the thighs, boldly, jesus, I was out of my skull, thighs knees high heels long tight stockings flow and flesh oh lord and she kicked her foot, turned on ankle, ow ow ow, mercy! And the red hair the red hair flocked all along the back of the chair, the red hair on fire in the lamplight, I could barely hold on I could barely understand, I did not deserve to even LOOK, and I knew it.

"Care for a beer?" I asked.

"All right," she said.

I got up and I could hardly walk. I had enough hose to put out a forest fire of napalm.

I came back with the beer, didn't give her a glass, watched her drink it from the bottle, that stuff going into her, into her red hair into her body into her everywhere and I peered up her legs not getting enough and I drank out of the bottle.

She put down her bottle. "You are a great writer," she said.

"That's no reason for coming to see me."

"Yes it is, yes it is. You see you fascinate me, you write this way and you look like, you look like—"

"The trashman?"

"Yes, or a diseased gorilla, an undergrown aged gorilla dying of cancer. And those goddamn eyes, slits of eyes but when you finally OPEN them for just that second—shit, I never saw eyes LIKE THAT, that COLOR, that VICIOUS FIRE—"

"And you came here to see what I was, see what I am, oh?"

"I guess so. I don't know. I don't know why I'm here. I don't. I only know that I'm here. I can't help it. You're a gorilla. You're some kind of snake. You're anything filthy. You stink. I don't know you. I know that you're not the guy at Bryan's staff meetings, threatening cripples, staggering about the room, cursing everybody and looking for more to drink more to drink more to drink. Such a swine you are!"

"A woman always wants to find the core, tame it, mold it; a wise man never shows the core to a woman. He just gives her a shot of light, shuts it off, becomes himself again. A woman practices rearing the child by taming the man first. I've got no use for women except to fuck them. I won't be trapped in. Love is a form of selfishness. Love is an excuse for cowards to quit."

“Nicely spoken. Sounds all right, bastard, but what does it mean?”

She lifted her beerbottle again, recrossed her legs, the skirt going HIGHER, jesus have mercy, the skirt going HIGHER, all that leg, all that thigh, all that red HAIR, god.

I got up and pulled the beerbottle from her mouth and put my dirty bearded face to hers, my lips sucking and twisting at hers, hard full crazy, she did not push me away, I grabbed her under the back, I had her back arched, I had her head rolling on the back of the chair, our lips splashed together spliced together crazy, my hand under the back of that BIG body, god, the beerbottle knocked over and spewing on the floor, and I reached down with the other hand and ripped her skirt all the way UP, lord lord lord then I had her standing, I was walking, pushing her all over the room, feeling that red hair around my ears across my face, feeling miracle and madness, and then I worked the pants down and then I HAD HER, I HAD HER, I HAD HER, and I worked, I grabbed that long red hair and I yanked down on it. I had her back arched arched hurting her and I HAD HER I worked and holding the hair still in my hands in back I got the cheeks and spread them, I had her nailed in the center of the rug, I had her on the cross, it was too late for her, she was on the spike, ripped ripped and the yellow light from the lamps bathed us and all that could be heard was our breathing and our grappling. Who would have guessed? Who? And then BANG the walls shook, a man on the street stepped on a grease spot, fell and broke his ankle and we slid apart like worms going in different directions, and she stood there and said, “ooooh ooooh ooooh I liked it, I liked it I liked it, you filthy greasy pig,” and then she turned and walked into the bathroom and closed the door. I went into the kitchen, took a dishtowel, wiped off. Got out 2 more beers. Lit a smoke.

She came on out, looking better than ever, she glowed all over burning, she was really beautiful, I could say it easy, she was really beautiful. I drank my beer and looked at her, neither of us saying anything. I lit her a cigarette. Then I had to piss. I went to the bathroom, closed the door, pissed, flushed, washed my hands, came out, and she was . . . gone. Fast like that. No goodbye. Nothing. I looked at the chair she had sat in. At the beerbottle on the floor. No, it had happened. Yes, I found one of her earrings. A green earring. Just one. It’s always ONE earring. What the hell? But never an earring like this.

I drank my beer straight down, walked outside. It was cold. All up and down DeLongpre it was the same. People locked in tight. Behind doors, behind windows. Everybody with their possessions, their people, their madness, their bank accounts, their car keys, their walnut faces, their constipation.

I looked north where I figured she lived with some fine intellectual chap who spoke the big words and the big meaning; some guys got these dolls automatically, I was lucky to see a photo in a newspaper. I took the earring the green earring and threw it north, hard, high in the dark sky, it flew out of sight in the neon mash of light from Sunset Boulevard a block north and I said, “Here, baby, your earring back and your life and all the rest, baby baby. But thanks for the splendid grade-AAA fuck.”

Then I went back inside, found her still untouched beer, picked it up, drank drank drank. Found the *Racing Form*, sat down in HER chair and began checking out my plays for the Santa Anita meet, and then I found one long red hair, one very long red hair along the arm of my chair and I picked it up and touched the end of it to my cigarette; it sizzled and shriveled and smoked ever so slightly. I moved the cigarette right up along the hair until it was all burned except to the smallest bit in my fingers and then I put that in the ashtray and burned that.

Charles Bukowski. Immortal writer. Immortal lover. You can’t go home again. It’s all too late.

I worked at the beer.

I’m not feeling good. Jesus, man, throw those beercans in the trashbag. Fuck, I got no old lady to pick up the shit, and thank god for that. Maybe that’s why I’m a peepfreak and a jackoff artist. I can’t stand pussy around all the time. I mean sitting around terrorizing me with her up and down emotions and crazy head. Another beer? Right at your foot there, half a six-pack. More in the box. Here in America a man ain’t a man unless he’s got three or four whores and a late model car. All right, I’m a little drunk. Maybe that’s why I mock myself. But put a new car and 3 women on my back and I’m fucked. I don’t have a t.v. I don’t even have a radio. A big

Brazilian cunt who wants to put that thing on me, calls me the last of the monsters. A monster-angel, whatever that means. But I'm running from *her* too, tho she'd be a beautiful fuck, a tremendous fuck. There's something inside of me grown a little wiser. After that walk back from the bathroom you start sharing a little two person hell. Yes, I've got a story, but wait, let me get another beer. Sure, I'm a degenerate peepfreak. I'd rather look at it. I don't want to get on top of it. Understand? So, I got this funny story. For peepfreaks. All right, Frank, I know you ain't a peepfreak. But pretend you're one. No, I ain't a homo, goddamn, why does *that* always come up?

I *said* I wasn't feeling good, so don't give me any shit. Sometimes I feel so bad I think I'm going nuts. You ever felt that way, Frank? No? Well, you're just a nice American beerdrunk with standard American feelings. You like to feel like a MAN. Doesn't that make you feel good to feel like a MAN, Franky boy? No, I don't want to fight. Suppose I won the fight? Your whole life would be ruined. Why do you interrupt me? I'm trying to get over and tell this funny peepfreak story, and I'll bet you've done some peeping too—on buses or with the ladies climbing out of cars or bending over garbage cans. No, I don't have a dirty mind; I just enjoy myself the way I am. Fuck off. I told you I'm not feeling good. Throw me another beer. Shit. I can't even go get my laundry. I'm going nuts. I even forgot where I TOOK my laundry! And when I find *that*, there'll be another chickenshit thing I'll have to do that is driving me crazy. What's that? I have to get a HAIRCUT! Look, dentists are nothing, but barbers TERRORIZE me! They are such ASSHOLES, that's why, Frank. That's why! You know the most TERRIBLE thing?? Eh? Frank, when they finish, they've just got to SPIN me in that chair, right BLAM in front of that MIRROR and I've got to look at my FACE, *pretend* to look at my HAIR, as if I gave a damn whether there was a piece of hair sticking up here or there! Who cares? Shit, man, I just want to get OUT of there! And there's that asshole barber standing behind me, I see him in the mirror, he's yawning and I'm on fire, and then I'm supposed to say "fine" or "o.k." I don't know where hell is, but it's gotta be in a barbershop. It's such smucky vain finky shit, jesus, who built men this way? Give me a dentist putting his elbow on my chest, sweating, with liquor on his breath. He gets the thing—"narrrrr, that didn't hurt, did it?" and then you spit out the blood and half of your jaw: "narrrrrb, narrrrrb, o.k., bloooooop . . ." You're not indebted—spiritually—and he begins whistling. Dentists always have this wonderful lack of faith in their ability that barbers don’t have, no matter how lousy barbers are. And most of them are, not that it matters. So then the son of a bitch of a barber unfrocks you and you are supposed to get up real calm, like the whole thing was so lovely and sweet and you are now a new man, and then you have to pay and TIP the son of a bitch! “Goodbye, now,” he says, “see you later.” “Goodbye,” you say. Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.

I’m trying to tell this peepfreak story. What? Yeah. I know, I KNOW! I know that many men *like* barbers. Many men sit in barbershops for *hours* and they don’t even *need* haircuts. They don’t need *anything*. They just play cribbage and talk about sports. They can look upon that dirty linoleum floor with dead sad hair upon it and they don’t feel anything. They are the *sane* men of the universe. They have nothing to do with their time except watch it die. They are goldfish. I’m *not* sane. They are always fucking with me. By they, I mean the must-do people. Shit, just thinking about getting a new driver’s license almost made me cut my throat. All those people in there taking their shitty little tests. Questions so simple that they are terrifying. People rubbing their heads—“psst, hey buddy, what’d de ansaw to the question number 3? Hey, I don’t unnerstan that one a tall . . .” Lines, lines, lines, lines, lines—lonely ladies in their late forties talking to the clerks, asking them question after silly question just to have somebody to TALK to . . . holding up the line for 15 minutes and the clerk, also lonely and lazy and with a hard dick, smiling, answering question after silly question. Dick hard, hot in there, everybody sweating and on the cross. FOR CHRIST’S SAKE, EVERYTHING’S SO HARD AND STUPID! Dicks, barbers, cops, landlords, income tax; fried eggs for breakfast . . . it’s looney. Give me another beer, shit, almighty, man. I’ll never tell this funny peepfreak story. I can’t pay my gas and light bills, my phone bill. It’s like trying to lift 4,000 pounds. It just doesn’t make sense. It’s just this chickenshit GNAWING, all these little snotty bills, again and again and again, no sense. You take a breather, say fuck it, look at the clouds for a couple of weeks. You come to your rented hole one night—the gas is off, the lights are out, the phone yanked out—what for? You owe them *all* a total, combined, of $39; they couldn’t wait. Shit, you’ve got $80 in your wallet. You just couldn’t go to the post-office and ask for 3 stupid money orders—the lines are long, the girls are suffering or stupid, and there’s always some idiot stepping on the backs of your shoes or trying to squeeze around in *front* of you. Madmen, dolts! A PISS UNIVERSE, I tell you! THERE ARE SO MANY STUPID THINGS TO DO THAT THERE ISN'T ANY TIME LEFT TO DO ANYTHING THAT ISN'T STUPID. And then you're driving along and a cop gives you a ticket because you haven't had TIME to get the motherfucking taillight fixed that somebody bashed while you were parked. And while he stops you he finds eight or ten things wrong—there's *never* enough brake, the headlights are out of line, the brake light doesn't work, the windshield wipers are *worn* and you only have one windshield wiper, on and on. Man, you're trying to *kill* yourself, here, good thing I came along. Here, take this ticket. Sign. Thank you, sir. Oh, thank you, officer. I don't have brains enough to know whether I can drive this car safely or not—I really want to kill myself, you know.

Throw me another beer, Frank. Everything drags me down. That's why I can't have any cunt around here chopping me down with her yak and demands. The whole thing is a war, Frank, can't you see? And I'm weakening. I've got a week's worth of newspapers on the floor. I can't pick them up. I can't even put a roll of toilet paper on a roller. That's work. Springs and twisting. More work. I just sit the roll on the floor. My guts are shot, my soul is shot. You must believe me, friend—just to set my soul *halfway* straight is a monstrous and impossible task.

You say I need LOVE? Horseshit! All right, I'm a loner and a loner usually hangs himself; a lover needs help and usually gets it; it all ends up in hanging. Sure I'm sick. Dizzy spells, and these white blisters on the hands; boils on the ass; inflamed throat, heart flutter, glass in the feet, neuritis and bursitis, toothache, headache, ulcers, ingrown hair and toenails, broken fingers, insomnia, anxiety—what the fuck. Name it, I'll trot it out. And a peepfreak. Hell, yeah. Which brings us to *that*. Goddamn it, I been trying to get to this peepfreak thing!

So I'm in the doctor's office. What was it for? I hate to tell you, but there's this thin line along my ass, very thin, indented, like I been sitting in a slab chair and it won't go away, this thin indented line. It's stupid, sure. I once saw a pigeon lying on the sidewalk. It was sick or something. Its wings wouldn't work. I could see it breathing. And on its still alive body the ants were already crawling. The top eye was open and looking at me. There were ants crawling across that *eye*. I didn't know what to do. I stepped over the bird and walked on down the street. 2 hours later I had forgotten about it. Now I had this line on my ass.

There were 3 of us waiting. Guy with crutch next to me. Girl with impossibly short skirt and fine nyloned legs all stilted up with very high heels. Holy, ummm, ummm. So I get a hard-on. I can't help looking. I want to look. Wow, it's all free. It's like walking into a closet full of gold. Such crazy things happen. And those broads are so off-hand about it. Real cinchy cool, which only makes it worse, and hotter. Oh my god. I am a peeper since the age of 6, 8, 10, 12, 48. When I was a kid we used to go under the slatted grandstands, crawl under there and peek up the women's legs, me and my buddy Harry. We used to go to the air races and do it. There was a lot of wind there and it was summertime. We saw some things. "Think of it," Harry said, "THOUSANDS OF PUSSIES!" "Jesus," I said, "you're making me a little sick." Harry is now a municipal court judge.

Well, anyhow, there I am in the doc's office with the line on my ass and there aren't thousands of pussies or millions, which is terrifying, but just one, and I can't *quite* see it and it's best that way. Of course, you imagine there might be something else there, some crazy kind of miracle.

Like a dick? There you *go*, Frank. I'm trying to tell this funny peepfreak story and you've got to come on like some dumb American lonely hero on the barstool of the good old neighborhood bar. Fuck you. This is the funny story. Listen. I told you I was a peepfreak. O.K. Listen, will you?

Right in the MIDDLE of my beautiful hard-on, I have to think, you KNOW what I HAVE to think? After all, she IS in a doctor's office. Christ, she might have the gon or the siff, right? AND THE THING DROPS RIGHT ON DOWN AND I ALMOST BEGIN HATING HER.

You think I'm nuts? The guy with the crutch must be thinking the same thing for he has been staring straight ahead for ten minutes at one of the paintings of a castle on the Rhine that the good German doctor has hung all about the waiting room. He must have 5 or 6 paintings of castles on the Rhine in that waiting room.

Me, I reach out and get a magazine, a dull one. *News-week* or such.

I had to read all about the Russian tanks in Prague so long after it happened. More mad shit like getting a driver's license. Hardly ever occurred with reason. Just more waste and waiting and bullshit. So I read it all again to keep from looking at those siff legs. The magazine account seemed no different than the newspaper version. God drab yawn insanity. More barbershop. That's what's so terrible about doctors' waiting rooms. All the warmed-over con. You had to *read* it and wait wait wait, or else it was sit and look at each other's FACES and *that* couldn't be done, obviously. So, everybody turning pages, everybody reading these dull magazines and sitting there THINKING: I wonder why I feel so bad?—"Some of the Hungarians riding tanks were asked by the Czechs why they had helped do this thing when Hungary was the same victim of the same Russian tanks not so long ago. The Hungarians turned away."—I wonder why I feel so bad the people in the waiting room think, reading magazines. Do I have the clap, cancer, acidosis, hepatitis, catalepsy, pyemia, seborrhea or scarlet fever? Flip, flip, the pages go, thinking, thinking.

So, you find *another* magazine, and wait.

So, there I was, and then an old woman walked out, chirping chirping to the GIRL in the short short skirt: "Ooooh, he put a stitch in my eye! Ooooh, I feel so much *better* now! Ooooh, honey, I feel so much better now! The stitch will have to come out later but I feel so much *better* now!"

"Well, sit down a moment, mama, and then we'll go home," says the girl in the short short short skirt with the nyloned legs of magic on the high high black tight heels. God.

My mind got at me good: Idiot idiot peepfreak lost lost. Fool, you WASTED all this time! She's the DAUGHTER! No CLAP! No nothing! Just the miracle of all those legs looking at you FREE, oh god have mercy, those clean miracle legs. WUNDERBAR!!!!

I began to leer over the top of a 4-week-old copy of LOOK.

I just got something GOING when mama and daughter rise and LEAVE. The daughter has on this short black slip, red dress, green panties, and after mama leaves out the doorway, she rather pulls the red dress down, stretches, bringing up the breasts, out the ass, then she is gone after mama and I am left with a shaft of pale sunlight in the doorway.

Then what happened? What could happen? The doc called in the guy with the crutch and I took down one of the paintings of a castle on the Rhine, took it down the elevator. Hit floor one, carried the castle on the Rhine to my car, threw it in the back seat and drove off.

What did I do that for? I don’t know. Maybe it was all I had left of the nylon legs, the green panties, I don’t know. Rather like taking one ant out of the eye of a living pigeon. Not much. Throw me a beer. I told you it was a funny peepfreak story. Why aren’t you laughing?

What? The line in my ass. It went away. I’d like to phone the doc and find out when the old lady is going to have the stitch out of her eye. But if I can’t hang up a simple roll of toilet paper then you know that I can’t do that either. Listen, Frank, I said THROW ME A BEER. I’m not feeling well, I told you so . . .

Going east. In the barcar. They had sent me money for the barcar. Of course, I’d had a pint getting on, and had stopped for a pint at El Paso. I was the world’s greatest poet and he was the world’s greatest editor and bookmaker (and I’m not talking about horses).

2,000 people in America read poetry and 900 of them bought books of poetry if they could be conned into it by word or format. The old boy took care of the format and I took care of the word. I spoke the language of the people through the mind of something else. “Charles Bukowski and the Savage Surfaces”: *Northwest Review*. I wasn’t supposed to have a mind. What I believed in was the clarity of the word. If I wanted to scream I screamed. Fuck them.

The old man bought paper that would last for 2,000 years. Put my words on the paper, but I wasn’t going to last any 2,000 years. I knew I didn’t have that much; I began late and would have spit it out 5 years back, but the others, the famed and the fancied, wrote so badly they made it difficult for me to quit.

So balls, the first book had sold out, all 750 copies—now the things went for 25 bucks and up at rare book dealers and I had one pair of old shoes and a long haul to Valhalla. The old man had a backer, a New York publisher. They were going for 3,000 copies and I wrote the stuff straight into the press, didn’t even send it off to the mags. The old man had sent back 5 for every one I wrote but he’d finally got enough, and I threw the others away.

I looked out that barcar window and remembered all my days on the bum, seeing that same dry dull frightening endless brown yellow yawning zero of land—travelling with track gangs, back and forth on hot stupid buses—all that senseless land—they told me the world was overpopulated? Nothing, nothing, nothing. And here, at last, I was in a barcar, playing poet. How odd it is, really, I thought, what a bunch of horseshit. I am no different than I ever was. I might have even been a better man then, though I doubt it. The older I got the better I got. What a crazy elixir! Elixir? What was that? It sounded good, but not a savage word.

"Bukowski is a beast," said the woman at the party. "He's horrible!"

"Oh come now," said the professor, "do you *really* think that?"

(Dear old Dr. Corrington, he always said I was a "savage," not a "beast.")

But I couldn't get a drink in the barcar. All those picture windows, and no drink. All that dry desert, wanting my bones and my ass; snakes to crawl through my eye-sockets, and no drink.

2 porters or waiters or whatever they were, they were standing in the vestibule (how's that for a word?) talking to each other about the stockmarket and pussy and the stupidity of the white man. It had gone on for about 10 minutes and I had sat at the table, waiting. I always felt inferior around those neatly white-jacketed black men, as if they knew something that I didn't. But they really *didn't* know anything that I didn't know, so I finally got up and weaved toward them, stood there a foot from them and listened to them talk. They ignored me. Finally their talk bored me so much that I broke into it:

"Pardon me, please. Pardon me."

"Yes?" one of them asked.

He would have said "yes sir" but I was already a bit drunk.

"Can one of you gentlemen tell me where I can find the bartender or just who *is* the bartender?"

"Oh," said the other one, "I am the bartender."

"Would it be possible to get a scotch and water fairly soon or is the bar closed?"

"Oh no, the bar is open."

"Then, please, I'd like a scotch and water. Beer chaser."

"Beer chaser, sir?"

"Yes, please, if you will."

"Any kinda beer?"

"No and yes. The best."

The savage went over and sat down. The s & w and beer arrived. The bill was atrocious, of course, and I also tipped atrociously. The other people in the barcar were well-dressed; I was the only poorly-dressed one, my shoes, in particular, being badly scuffed and worn. But now that I had found the bartender, everybody wanted him. I had spoiled his day. But the day of the train was over. The rich rode the jets and crashed to their deaths in planeloads totaling 186, or ended in Cuba, hijacked, pissed and scared. Only the poor rode the trains. The Mexicans, the Indians, the Negroes, the poets. The porters sniffed and lifted their noses at us. They remembered the better days. When everybody was laughing and throwing money. Now it was over.

I ordered again. The same. I liked the picture window. It was a horror show. I kept imagining myself out there with the snakes and toads and cacti, and it was horrible. And then I imagined myself back on the train with the white-jacketed aristocratic blacks and the poor blacks and the starving Mexicans and Indians and it was still horrible, in or out, up or down; I drank it down. There wasn't a woman on the train under 40. It was a shitty trip. Even on the first trip traveling toward that first book I had picked up a looker; all right, she had 2 small children, but what a body and legs, and we'd sat ass to ass, one of the kids in her lap, one in mine, both asleep, and she'd run that tongue down my throat while our flanks were together, and I'd felt her all over. Hardly a fuck, but it helped time go. And during the day I'd felt like a married man, but I allowed myself to drink all I wished and it was rather funny. Then helping her off at the New Orleans station and then skipping off to the great editor and his wife. "Bye bye, dear." I'd bet she'd thought she'd hooked a damn fool. Well, she would have, I suppose. Thank god for the great editor and his pages that last 2,000 years.

Now there was nobody. Not a cunt under 40 within 400 miles. Life could be bitter. Even for a mindless savage.

I stayed on in the barcar, through the afternoon and into the night. Everything looked better at night because you couldn't see it as well. That's why it's best to screw in the dark if you can't go grade A. The less you can see of a human being, for screwing or even for looking, the more you can forgive.

Anyway, by the time I made New Orleans this second time I was further drunk and further flung apart than ever before. Poet? What the hell was that? I didn't play freak games.

The great editor and his wife were there to meet me.

"Hello, Buke," the great editor said with a tiny smile. He was the kool one.

"What do they call you?" people would ask me.

"Buke to rhyme with Puke," I always told the people. This satisfied them.

We got into a cab and they took me to my chosen room. Their own place was stacked high with pages of Bukowski poems, page one, 3500 high, standing there. Page two, 3500 high standing there. Pages in the bathtub, in trunks, pages everywhere. You couldn't shit for pages. They even put the bed on stilts high up in the air. Bukowski under the bed. Bukowski in the shitter. Bukowski in the kitchen.

"Bukowski, Bukowski, Bukowski, Bukowski EVER-WHERE! Sometimes I think I'll go mad! I can't stand it!"

He was the kool one. She was *Italiano*—the fire. I loved her. Everybody did. No bullshit about her.

"But we love you, Bukowski."

"Thank you, Louise."

"Even though you are a bastard most of the time."

"I know. But sincerely, I don't try to be."

"You don't have to try, Buke," said the old man.

I made them stop for a pint somewhere. I hadn't eaten in a couple of days but I wasn't hungry. We got to the room, Louise paid the cabbie and we went on in.

Now, me, I'm crazy. I like solitude. I've never been lonely. There is something wrong with me. I have never been lonely. So when I saw this place, I saw it wasn't for me, because look, the whole place ran long, front to back. I mean you came in through the shuttered doors, and here was the front room and you just walked straight on down through to the rooms. It was like one long hall, kitchen in the back, get it, only the shitter was a little off to the side but everything was lined-up like a long snake and you had to pass through one room to get to another, no doors. Shit, for a monk of solitude it shook me—I mean, I'll take a whore for a one-night stand but who wants the whole world forever?

So, we all went in back, to the kitchen, and here was my landlady. They had arranged it. Nice clean place. Sure, and she was fat, very fat, my landlady was very fat in a big pink and white housegown and we all sat at the table and I opened the pint and the landlady got out some beers.

"This is Charles Bukowski, the great poet," said the great editor.

"This is Shirley."

"Poor and savage," I said, "pleased ta."

"Pleased ta," said big sad fat Shirley. Lonely.

(Oh, god have mercy upon my spare and worn parts.)

Well, the beer got around and I didn't let anybody touch my pint. I was worried about my solitude. I guess Shirley had gotten up early. Maybe worried about meeting Charles Bukowski. They had probably given her a bit of a line, not a line to them. The old man had once told me, "you've ruined me for all other poets. You lay it down so hard, like a railroad track straight through hell."

Well, I wasn't that good, but he got the message.

So, Shirley was drooping with me. Shirley in her big fat housegown, and me, a bum, playing the role of Charles Bukowski. The world is full of literary-hustlers and the less talent they have the more they hustle; me, I didn't have to hustle very much. I didn't have to hustle very hard. But there was Shirley. And when people figure they are around a writer, especially a poet, they just have to open their soul-pores. Shirley opened up.

Well, really, tho, it's nice talking in kitchens, esp. if you have a lot to drink. Kitchens are where you can really talk. It's harder to lie in a kitchen or while you are taking a shit, than in a fancy front room. However, it can still get itchy, sticky. I was only an emotional man when it concerned my own problems. I was still growing, but very slowly, and I knew it. I knew I'd have to hit 50 before I got a bit of sense, got a bit objective, and then I'd be too tired to make it interesting. In short, I was fucked.

So Shirley started dropping these tears down her fat, materialistic face, human still, real still, she was an old gal who'd been there, the mill. I'd met dozens of them, but they could be as cruel as the rest. It was a hard slam. She was talking about a good Jewish boxer she'd known, married. I wasn't Jewish, but I knew my boxing. When a Jew laced on those gloves he'd show you a battleship full of guts. In those days, there were quite a few good Jewish fighters.

"Jackie," she said, "he beat everybody. But the champs wouldn't get into the ring with him. He was too good. And he never trained. All he did was drink. That was his training. But they locked him out. The championship went from one man to another. He blew all his purses. Bought drinks all up and down the bar, all up and down the street. He loaned money and they never paid him back. He died one night fast, just died in bed. He just let out this loud moan and died. Everybody was at his funeral, everybody. He was such a great man."

The tears were rolling.

I was finally quite drunk. "What the hell," I said, "he can't do you any good in the grave! He can't fuck you from the grave. I can lay it to you. I'm right here! I can shove you ten inches!"

Then she really started to cry.

I lifted my drink: "Ten inches. Solid."

Everybody started acting rather peculiar, so I took my bottle and went to the place they said was going to be my bedroom, stripped down to my shorts, and sat there drinking from my pint.

"Hey," I screamed, "you sons of bitches rolled me! Which one of you rolled me?"

I kept screaming for my money until I found I had hidden it under the pillow. Then I had another drink, crawled into bed and went to sleep. Shirley was frightened of me and didn't want to let me stay but the great editor said I was all right—long train ride, too much to drink. When they told me the scene the next day I didn't remember any of it. Shirley owned an eating place in the French Quarter. When she went to work I went out and bought two dozen red roses and put them on the kitchen table. She kept those roses until they fell to pieces. And she kept the card. And pressed one rose in a book.

Meanwhile, the old man had me signing pages. 3500 pages to make sure that we got 3000 good ones. I had to sign them with a silver pen, mostly, and various different colored pens, a kind of thick ink paint. It was slow. It took each page 8 minutes to dry. I had pages spread all over the bed and on chairs and dressers. When Shirley got in from work, there I'd be, all covered with pages and drunk on beer. I got tired of straight signings. I'd sign my name, then say something, and then draw a picture, any kind of picture. This slowed up the process but it took the dullness out of it. Shirley wasn’t frightened of me anymore. On the beer, I was just mellow. She’d cook me a good dinner and then tell me about the store, the café.

“Jesus, I burned two pots of strawberries today, two whole pots! It was awful.”

“No shit.”

“Yeah. I was in the other room talking to a friend a mine and she said, ‘I smell something burning!’ and I ran into the kitchen and there were burned strawberries boiled over everywhere! God!”

“You oughta keep your mind on your business.”

“I like you Buke. You remind me of Jackie.”

“I can’t fight a lick.”

“No, I mean you don’t come on with a lot of phony talk the way most people do.”

After dinner I go back to the bedroom and sign more pages. Then around ten I’d take my beer into the kitchen and Shirley and I would watch television together until midnight, sometimes one or two a.m. All the time she was making these little dolls which she sold at her place. She was very good at it. And she made hats. The hats were good too. Very unusual.

“Business ain’t what it used to be. People don’t even carry money anymore. Everything is credit and travelers checks. I can barely make it. Want a little nip of whiskey?”

“O.K. Shirley, thanks.”

It was the same every night. I could lay around and play poet. I’d never have to leave. All I had to do was lay it into her. But she was so fat. So fat. I didn’t have the desire.

“Have another little nip.”

“O.K., Shirley, thanks.”

“Do you ever hear them people next door?”

“No.”

“Oh, that’s right, they’re on vacation. Wait until they get back. The minute he gets home he starts hollering at her, calling her a whore, all sorts of things. Then he beats her. Then he fucks the shit outa her. You can hear the whole walls shake.”

“Jesus.”

“Every night, the same thing.”

“Ummm, ummm. Well, Shirley, I have to go to bed now. See you tomorrow.”

“Sure, baby.”

Then I’d go to bed. Alone. About noon I’d go over and take the editor the pages I’d signed. When I finally got finished the stack of pages was 7 feet high. But I didn’t finish until my last night in town. Sometimes I’d drink over at the editors and tell them some bullshit stories. They liked them. The roaches ran up and down the walls and Bukowski was everywhere.

I met their fiction editor in a bar one night in the Quarter. They introduced me. He was deaf and dumb. We wrote messages on paper napkins all night. He came on good. We wrote messages on those napkins until I drank him under, then I made my way back to Shirley’s place. Another night, I am sitting in a bar with a guy at the piano playing and clowning, then he grabbed the mike and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, we have with us tonight, the poet, Charles Bukowski.”

I waved and the bastards applauded. I’m sure they never heard of me. Later, back in the crapper while taking a leak, some guy walked up to me.

“Are you the Charles Bukowski they announced up front?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, would you mind telling me where you have been published and when?”

“Fuck you, buddy!” I zipped up, washed my hands and walked out.

I never stuck it into Shirley. Night after night, I never. It looked like back to Los Angeles for me. At least in the Quarter I was a half-celebrity. Back in L.A. I was just another guy without money. Louise stood on a corner trying to sell paintings while the great editor rolled Bukowski off the press. And the roaches lazed in the sun. It was a quiet and easy time. I signed the last of the pages while drinking at their place and when I was done, we had a stack seven feet tall. 3500 Bukowski signatures and drawings. I had done it. The book was going to go for $7.50. CRUCIFIX IN A DEATHHAND. And how.

I said goodbye to Shirley the next day in her shop. She looked genuinely sad. The long t.v. nights of drinking while she made the dolls and hats in the kitchen were over. The good dinners were over. The easy New Orleans life was shot for me. I couldn’t stick it in. “I’ll never forget the roses and you,” she said. “I’ll write about you some day, Shirley,” I threatened her. I squeezed her hand and left her there with her boiling strawberries and some rich bitch trying on one of her 25 dollar hats that cost her a dollar to make. The rich bitch looked good, but she was for somebody else.

The great editor and his wife took me down to the train station. In the baggage room they had this long wooden partition. It looked like a bar. I hit the wood and hollered, “I wanna buy drinks for everybody in the house!”

Two young girls there started laughing.

“That was really funny,” one of them said.

Balls.

I packed into the train and the great editor and his wife waved to me through the window. I blew a kiss and the train pulled out. I broke the cellophane on the pint and had the first one. I’d find the barcar later. So here we were. Louisiana. And thinking of the long ride through Texas that broke your back. I found the barcar anyhow. I didn’t like trains, trapped in there with the people. It was sometime next day, sitting in the barcar, I seemed to hear a porter hollering “Charles Bukowski! Charles Bukowski!” Maybe I was going mad at last. He walked up to my table. “You must be Charles Bukowski,” he said.

“Yes. Poet, and lover,” I answered.

“Telegram, Mr. Bukowski.”

I gave him a quarter, opened the telegram.

“Dear Buke. We miss you terribly. Our world is not the same without you. Please be careful and take care of yourself.

love,
Jon and Lou Webb.”

I ordered a drink and looked out the picture window. “California here I come, right back where I started from . . .” The trainride was just one long drunk. Days later, dead and torn, I opened the cab door and got out. There was the old front court, my little girl saw me. “Hank! Hank!” I was hooked. I carried her inside. There was the woman.

“Well, how was it?”

“Hard to describe. I’m tired.”

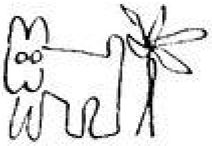
“You go to bed, Hank,” said the little girl, “you go to bed.”

“First I gotta peepee.”

“O.K., you peepee, then you go to bed. When you wake up, we’ll play.”

"O.K."

The woman made a bacon and egg sandwich. I laid in bed and read the L.A. Times and then I knew I was back. There were ten or fifteen letters. I read them. Everybody was lonely. Everybody was in agony. I threw the letters on the floor and in ten minutes I was asleep at 2 in the afternoon. Outside the cats played, the butterflies flew, the sun kept working. The party was over. Charles Bukowski was Hank again. Rent was needed. Food. Gasoline. Luck. CRUCIFIX IN A DEATHHAND. Finished.



It's a world, it's a world of potential suicides, well, I speak mostly of the United States, I don't know the rest, but it's a place of potential and actual suicides and hundreds and thousands of lonely women, women just aching for companionship, and then there are the men, going mad, masturbating, dreaming, hundreds and thousands of men going mad for sex or love or anything, and meanwhile, all these people, the love-lost, the sex-lost, the suicide-driven, they're all working these dull soul-sucking jobs that twist their faces like rotten lemons and pinch their spirits, out, out, out . . . Somewhere in the structure of our society it is impossible for these people to contact each other. Churches, dances, parties only seem to push them further apart, and the dating clubs, the Computer Love Machines only destroy more and more a naturalness that should have been; a naturalness that has somehow been crushed and seems to remain crushed forever in our present method of living (dying). See them put on their bright clothes and get into their new cars and roar off to NOWHERE. It's all an outside maneuver and the contact is missed.

The other night—at somebody else's suggestion—we drove down Hollywood Boulevard. I have lived in Los Angeles, off and on, since 1922 and I don't believe I have driven down Hollywood Boulevard more than half a dozen times (I am eaten by my own kind of madness). It was a Friday night and here they drove slowly, the street was jammed. The people in the cars were watching the people on the sidewalks and the people on the sidewalks were walking along looking in the closed store windows. Here and there was a movie house showing movies of people supposedly living.

Further on were a few clubs and bars but nobody went in. Nobody was spending any money. Nobody was doing anything. They just watched and drove and walked. I suppose there was action enough somewhere, but hardly there and hardly for the masses. Here they worked all week on jobs they hated, and now given the slightest bit of leisure time they wasted it, they murdered it. It was more than I cared to have a lengthy view of. I turned off the boulevard, found Fountain Ave. and drove back toward Los Angeles.

I sit here playing writer each day and my typer faces the street. I live in a front court, and I don't consciously work. Wait, that's a mistake—I *do* consciously work—but I don't consciously *watch*, but toward evening I see them coming in—walking and driving—most of them are young ladies who live alone in all these high rise apartments which surround me. Some of them are fairly attractive and most of them are well-dressed, but something has been beaten out of them. That 8-hour job of doing an obnoxious thing for their own survival and for somebody else's profit had worked them over well.

These ladies immediately disappear into the high-rise walls, close the apartment door and vanish forever. From the cubicle of the job to the cubicle of resting and waiting to return to the job. The job is the center. The job is the sun. The job is the mother's breast. To be jobless is the sin; to be lifeless doesn't matter. Of course, one must consider their side—a job is money and to be moneyless is not comfortable. I know enough about this. And every person can't be an artist; that is, a painter, a musician, a composer, a writer, whatever. Many lack the talent, many lack the courage; most lack both. Even artists can't remain artists forever, especially good artists who can earn enough to survive within their craft. The talent goes, the courage goes, something goes. What's left for the average person but an occupation that must, finally, kill the spirit? I am very sorry, for instance, for my own doctor. Now certainly here is a person who could afford a training that might put him into a profession more enlightening than a punch press operator. But I sit in his packed waiting room and see that he too is caught. He hustles his patients in and out, barely asking them what is wrong with them. He weighs them, gives them a pill and now and then sticks a snake up their ass. If something further goes wrong he might suggest a hospital, an operation. He must pay office rent, receptionist rent, and have a wife in his home, an acceptable doctor's wife in an acceptable doctor's home. His life is simply a durable hell. His children, too, might become doctors if he can educate them.

Very well, I watch my ladies vanish into their high-rise walls to shower and eat and watch tv, read the paper, phone Joyce, then smear themselves with cream, set the alarm and sleep. I am not a woman but I must imagine that some of them have sexual drives and a wish for male companionship and love. It must be so. But there's the job. And there's nobody down there, my god. There's the weekend. What to do with the weekend? Those sons of bitches just want to get in my panties, that's all. Hit and run, goodbye. Who wants to be part of a cunt pile?

Everybody's blocked off from each other. Finally, out of desperation and advancing age, a man is chosen, first, perhaps for sexual pleasure and then later for marriage, a marriage that never works, a marriage that becomes dull and desperate, another durable hell or maybe an unendurable one. Marriage is a contract to live in dullness until death do us part. What else then? Prostitution? Ugggg.

Hundreds of thousands of lonely and frustrated men and women living mostly without sex and certainly without love, working at jobs they hate, running red lights, crashing into fire plugs and store windows, gambling, drinking, taking dope, smoking 2 packs a day, masturbating, going crazy, going crazier and crazier, getting religious, buying goldfish and cats and monkeys . . .

Hundreds of thousands of lonely and frustrated men and women who settle for Disneyland instead of love, who settle for a baseball game instead of sex . . . Hundreds of thousands of lonely and frustrated men and women who'll pass each other on the sidewalk and be afraid to look at each other's faces, at each other's eyes for fear they'll be accused of being on the make. Blocks and walls of horror-movie magazines, girly magazines, nudey magazines, nude movies, vibrators, dirty jokes—everything but contact and real action. I must guess that the United States must be the loneliest place in the world with England not far behind. Too often I'd heard the guys talk on the job about the wild times they had in the army, the drunks, the whores . . . When I asked them, "What are you doing now? Why did you stop?" I got these strange looks. It's simple. They are afraid here now in civilian life. Have to keep the job. Have to pay off the car. Have to—No army to take care of them now. No 3 square meals. No bunk. No sure payday. No Uncle Sam to cure their clap . . . Their wildness, their courage was regulated and safe enough.

I tell you, we must be the most backward nation on earth. In our prisons we do not believe in allowing the men even limited sexual relationships with the opposite sex, yet we wonder why the men molest and ravage each other in desperation. You say they made a mistake? Crime is in the definition of it. Suppose you made a mistake? Would you like to be beaten by a dozen men and made into a sexual idiot? What judge passed that sentence? It's strange that in one of the most backward states, Mississippi, certain inmates are allowed to have limited sexual relationships with women—even though most of them are or pose as wives—from the outside.

We murder ourselves with sex and occupation; the madhouses crawl with sexually maladjusted and occupationally-destroyed people.

Answers? Who knows? We're structured in. The bars are heavy.

The other day I stopped for gas. I don't know how it got around to the subject, I think a woman walked by and that started it, but the attendant said, "I haven't had a piece of ass in 5 years." I laughed. "You're kidding, man." "No, I'm serious. 5 years now." He was in his 20's. I drove away thinking about what a friend of mine had said, "Where *are* the women? Tell me, where *are* they? Where's the *action*?" There's none. It's a desert.

My friend drives from Los Angeles to Mexico each weekend to fulfill his sexual desires in a whorehouse.

I don't know, my friends. Look at these walls, look at these people, look at these faces, these streets . . . We've all locked ourselves up. The rapists come out at night and the murderers, and the ladies lock themselves in and wait for the big one, the dream man, the money and soul man, the man of brilliant conversation, the man that mama might like. Set the alarm. He may walk in on the job . . . tomorrow, next week, next month, next year . . . surely he's out there . . . These sons of bitches just want to get into my panties . . . I wonder what Bukowski's like?

Monday afternoon was my day to see the girl. She was 7.

The hangover wasn’t too bad and I drove down to Santa Monica via Pico Boulevard. When I got there the door was open. I pushed in. She was writing a note. The mother of my child. Her name was Vicki.

“I was just going to leave you this note. Louise is at Cindy’s.”

“O.K.”

“Look. Could I have some money?”

“How much?”

“Well, I could use $45 now.”

“I can only let you have 20.”

“All right.”

She lived in an unfurnished one-bedroom Synanon apt., $130 a month. Vicki was one of those who had to always belong to some organization . . . she had gone from poetry reading workshops to the communist party to Synanon. Whenever she became insulated she went to a new organization. Well, that was as sensible as anything else.

We walked over to Cindy’s. Cindy was black. The 2 girls played with their paper dolls on the floor. Her mother was white, fat and in bed.

“She’s got asthma,” Vicki said to me.

“Hello,” I said to Cindy’s mother.

Cindy’s father wasn’t about. He was on the cure and working a gas station.

“Will you drive me to Synanon?” Vicki asked. “Or I can take the bus.”

(Synanon had a bus line too.)

“All right,” I said, “I’ll drive you down.”

“Come on, Louise,” she said, “pick up your stuff and let’s go.”

“But, Mommy, I just want to get this last dress on the doll.”

“All right, but hurry up” . . .

I left Vicki off in front of the building. Then we drove east.

“Where we going, Hank?”

“To the beach, I guess.”

“But I wanted to go to the Synanon beach . . .”

“The beaches are all alike . . . there’s dirty water and dirty sand.”

Louise began sobbing. “But I wanted the Synanon beach! They don’t like war! They don’t kill people!”

“Look, little one, we’re almost at the other beach. Let’s try it anyhow.”

“But people don’t carry guns at Synanon!”

"You're probably right, but I'm afraid that sometimes we still need guns just like we need knives and forks."

"Silly," she said, "you can't eat with a gun!"

"A lot of people do," I said.

It was winter and cold and there weren't many cars about or people either. Louise had had lunch at noon but I hadn't eaten yet. We walked into the little Jewish grocery store next to the candleshop. I got a hotdog, some chips and a 7-UP. Louise got some kind of candy cracker and a 7-UP. We walked to the last cement table near the water.

"It's cold," I said. "Let's turn our backs to the sea."

So we sat there facing the boardwalk. There were 14 or 15 people about but they had the strange tranquility of the seagulls, the winter seagulls. No, it wasn't a tranquility but a deadness. They were like bugs. They simply stood or sat together, motionless, not talking.

"It's too bad I have to look at those people," I said, biting into my hotdog.

"Why don't you want to look at them?"

"They have no desire."

"What's 'Desire'?"

"Well, let's see. 'Desire' is wanting something you usually can't get right when you want it, but if you have enough 'Desire' you can sometimes get it anyhow . . . Oh, hell—that sounds like 'Ambition' which is something you're trained to do instead of something you want to do . . . Let's just say that those people don't want anything."

"Those people don't want anything?"

"Right. In a sense, nothing affects them so they don't want anything, they aren't anything. Especially in Western Civilization."

"But that's the way they are. Maybe that's a good way to be."

"Some wise men say so. I guess all of everything is how you work at it. A direction. I still don't like to look at those people while I'm eating."

"Hank! You're not nice! There's nothing wrong with those people! I ought to slap you across the face with this cracker!"

She picked up the cracker as if to hit me with it. I thought that was very funny. I laughed. She laughed too. We both felt good together, at last.

We finished eating and walked down toward the water. I sat down on a little cliff above the water and wet shore, and Louise built a sand castle . . .

It was then that I noticed the two men walking along the waterfront from the east. And the one man walking along the waterfront from the west. They all appeared to be in their mid-twenties. The man walking from the west had a large bag and seemed to be stopping and picking things up and dropping them into this bag. He didn't seem to sense the two men approaching him from the east, but there was still quite a football field between them. 2 football fields.

The two walking from the east had on heavy boots and kicked at things along the shore. The one from the west almost swayed in the wind, bending over, picking up things for his paper sack. And I thought, it's too bad, but the poor guy with the paper sack doesn't realize that the other two guys are going to jump on him and beat him up. Can't he realize that? It was a surety. And since I sensed it, I couldn't understand how the guy with the bag couldn't sense it. And the lifeguard in his little white shack on stilts . . . couldn't he see?

It almost happened in front of me. All the men had beards but the 2 from the east had shorter beards; their beards almost looked angry . . . The guy with the paper sack just had hair all over his face and neck and back and front and everywhere. Then he looked up and saw the other two . . . He tried to walk around them, on the side toward the sea. Just then a wave rolled in and the guy nearest him pushed him into the water. His paper sack went out with the tide.

As he got up, the other guy hit him and he went down again and then they were kicking at his body and his face with their boots. At first he held his hands over his face, then his hands fell away, but they kept kicking at his face.

Then they rolled him over and took something out of his pocket. A wallet. They took something out of the wallet and then threw the wallet far out into the sea.

Then they looked around and saw me sitting there. They looked at me. It was a kind of zoo thing—the way monkeys looked at you. They could see that I was old but they could see that I was big too, and I looked bigger in that black lumberjack my landlord had given me.

I looked at their faces and noticed that they were not particularly brave faces. I turned to the kid and told her, "You stay up here on the sand . . ."

Then I leaped from the cliff and hit the wet sand and walked toward them. I pulled the switchblade, hit the button and the blade jumped out.

They didn't move. Their game. I moved forward.

Then one guy started running and the other guy moved after him. They ran down the shore, around the pile of searocks and were gone. The lifeguard still stared out at sea . . .

I walked over to the guy and turned him over. Sand was mixed in with blood and hair. I took the sea water as it came in and splashed it over his face. Hair grew upon his face where it wasn't supposed to grow. It grew right in near the nose. I don't mean under it, I mean right around the edges of the nose. Up by the eyes. There was a bird-like thing about him, an inhuman thing about him. I disliked him. I helped him up.

"You o.k.?"

"Yeah. Yeah. But they took my money. 3 dollars. My money's gone."

I picked him up and walked him over to a small cliff, away from Louise and sat him down.

"I live under the pier," he said.

"Are you serious?"

"5 years now. I think it's been 5 years."

"I can only give you a dollar."

"Will you?"

"Here."

The dollar seemed to bring him out of it.

"Do you live around here?" he asked.

"No. Los Angeles."

"How do you make it?"

"Luck, I guess."

Then Louise waved from her sand castle. I waved back. My friend and I looked out at sea. A small ugly boat of some sort was slowly passing by out there, doing something.

Then my friend said, "Yesterday 2 guys were sucking each other off under the pier and some plain-clothes cops caught them and locked them up. Do you think that's right?"

"Well, I don't know," I said.

“I mean,” he said, “if 2 guys want to suck each other off, that’s their business, isn’t it?”

“Well, looking at it from that angle, I suppose you’re right . . . But look, I’ve got to check on my little girl right now.”

I walked over and sat down by Louise.

My friend walked up the sand toward the boardwalk.

She smiled at me:

“You like my castle?” she asked.

I looked.

“It’s beautiful,” I said, “but better than that, it’s very nice.”

“What’s the difference between ‘Beautiful’ and ‘Very nice’?”

“Well, ‘Beautiful’ is usually what people say when they don’t mean it and ‘it’s very nice’ is usually what they way when they really mean it.”

“Oh.”

It was a very nice sand castle. We both hated to leave it there like that, so we smashed it down with our feet. Then she held my hand as we walked across the sand toward the parking lot. There were quite some hours left in our Monday together and we needed something different to do.

I have lost some of the letters or I am too lazy to look for them but the first one was something about him being in a motel, in Sunland maybe, no, that doesn’t sound right, maybe it was the Sunland Motel, no, that isn’t it either, anyhow, I let the letter lay around three or four days and then I phoned, and the phone number given was one digit short, so I looked up the motel, whatever it was, and I phoned in and asked for a Jack M—, and Jack M— was out, and I left the message, and then I got lost, either at the track or in some other way and one day I was home (home?) and the phone rang and it was Jack M—and he said he had been trying to reach me and would Friday night be all right? I said yes. And he said, about 8, I gotta catch a plane at the International at 10:30, it’s a shame I couldn’t a gotten you earlier.

So that Friday Neeli and Liza happened to be around and we were drinking beer in the breakfastnook and I warned them that this professor from this eastern university was coming around and that they'd better brace up, you know, for anything.

We weren't to be denied. The doorbell rang and Neeli and Liza began laughing. "It's the professor," I said.

I went to the door.

"ARE YOU CHARLES BUKOWSKI?" he asked with great pompous and sonorous force.

"Yeh," I said, "Come on in."

He followed me to the breakfastnook. He had a briefcase and a six-pack of beer. He had heard the legend: you go see Bukowski, you better bring a six-pack. I made the introductions and opened the beers. The prof sat down. He looked more like 1940 than anything else. Very straight back. Tie. Tweed jacket.

He began to interview. But he didn't have a tape recorder. And he didn't take shorthand. It was evident he couldn't interview me. The questions were harmless and I suggested that we go into the other room. I still attempted to answer Jack M—'s questions the best I could. We finished his beer and then I brought out my own. But he was nervous. Neeli and Liza were goading him a bit and I don't think they realized that he knew it, so I tried to treat him with a bit more civility. But then he had to leap up to use the phone.

It was the time of the protests of Nixon's move to blockade the harbors in N. Vietnam. Jack M—had heard that protestors were down at the airport, and they were, but he found out over the phone that flights were still leaving, but it was obvious that he was very nervous about it, and we agreed with him that it was best that he left soon.

A week or so later I received a letter from the professor explaining that here were some questions he had really meant to ask (but in all the confusion . . .) and would I mind? The questions sat about a week or so and then I sat down and answered them. It went like this:

1) Why is your phone unlisted?

Simple. Two years ago, that is before I quit my job, I didn't have as much laying around time as I do now. The little free time I had then was needed toward creation. A ringing phone is a hazard. People have a way of inviting themselves over. At one time I didn't answer the door, the phone or the mail. I feel that I was justified. I feel that what I created during that time proves it. Now I murder my own time. But I feel that what I create now also justifies that.

2) Have you ever written, or thought about writing, a film scenario?

Excuse me, what is a film scenario? Does it have anything to do with movies? Then the answer is no. I have never seen a movie that didn't make me a bit sick. I don't want to make anybody sick.

3) Do you have anything like an aesthetic theory?

What does "aesthetic" mean? I don't have any theories. I simply DO. Or is that a theory, uh? Uh.

4) How about a philosophy of history?

I don't like history. History is a terrible weight which proves nothing except the treachery of man and I am aware of that by walking down the street NOW. History is dull and doubtful and I don't know how much of it is true. History is the memory of victory and defeat, and I've got enough on my mind now.

5) How about the common belief that all poems are political?

No, I think that most poems are cows with big sagging empty tits. I presume that by "political" you mean poems that move something toward the ultimate betterment of Man and the Government of Man. That's all too perfect and coy. A poem is often something that is only necessary toward one man—the writer. It's often a perfect form of selfishness. Let's not credit ourselves with too much. Garage mechanics are more human than we are.

6) Have you written music?

Uhuh. I never liked those notes and lines and things they tried to teach me in school, I hated the teacher, so I deliberately didn't learn the notes. Now it seems too late and too silly. Music affects me much more than writing or painting, though, and I seem to be listening to it continually—classical, rock, jazz, anything. It's awfully good shit.

7) Other writers you admire (besides Jeffers and Aiken—I'm thinking of Anthony Burgess, for example, whose *Enderby* is somewhat Bukowskian . . . & as a matter of fact, Burgess used to be a composer)?

Never heard of Burgess, which doesn't mean he isn't any good. I don't read much anymore. I like Artaud, Céline, Dostoyevsky, Kafka and the STYLE of the early Saroyan without the content. Then maybe Eugene O'Neill or somebody like that. Most writers simply don't have it and never will. There's hardly any looking around, up, down, before and before that.

A pack of shameful fakes. If I ever go to hell there will be all writers down there. There could be nothing worse.

8) Several times during our "interview" you said, sardonically, "I'm immortal"; now I'm no depth psychologist or mystic-of-the-word . . . but the thought occurs to me that maybe you sometimes brood on what sort of trace you'll leave as an artist, a writer . . . and also on human perishability. (There's a question somewhere in that preceding sentence.)

There is? Well, about the "immortal," I hope I said it "sardonically." The only good thing about writing is the writing itself—that is, to bring me closer to what is necessary NOW and to keep me from becoming anything like the first face I pass on a sidewalk on any given day. When I die they can take my work and wipe a cat's ass with it. It will be of no earthly use to me. The only trace I want to leave, after death, is upon myself, and that isn't important to you. Incidentally, one of the best things I like about humans is that they do perish.

9) Anything in astrology or Zen or any of the popular cults you believe in?

I don't have time for cults. That business is for the large gang of people who need toe-tickling. For them, it's all right. It might even be helpful. But I build the IDEA of myself from myself and my experience. I will have my blind sides, true. And I might have much to learn from other men. But, basically, I am not a learner from other men. I am headstrong and prejudiced but it's good to live without too much instruction from other men. I've found the most learned men to be bores and the dumbest seem to be the most profound and uncluttered. Who wants to be many voices when there is only one voice trying to get out?

10) You told me you stopped writing when you were 24 (incidentally, have you written an account of this episode with your father? If you haven't we'd like to see it for THE ____REVIEW—we pay something like $50.00 for stories and essays) . . . but you didn't tell me when you started writing before that, and why you started writing.

I'd much rather you paid me $50 for answering these questions. I'm not sure that thing I told you about my father is quite true, although there is a partial truth. Sometimes when I'm talking I improve on things to make them better. Some people might call it lying; I call it an art-form, and, uh uh, no, I didn’t tell you when I started writing or why, but I was drinking, wasn’t I? And also, you didn’t ask. And also, I’m glad you didn’t ask.

11) Is there anything, other than booze and women (I presume), that stimulates you creative lust? (Smell of horses, faces in the crowd at the track?) (You sort of answered this, but I’d like to hear more if you’d like to say it.)

Everything, of course, stimulates my creative lust. Faces in the crowd do it plenty. I can look at faces and become disgusted and terrorized and sickened. Others can find beauty in them like large fields of flowers. I guess I ain’t much of a man for that. I am narrow. I can’t see the horizons or the reasons or the excuses or the glories. The average face to me is a total nightmare.

Well, shit, I guess I don’t look so good to others either. I’ve been told I’m a very ugly man by more than one. So there’s your joke. Let’s get off these faces. I know that I haven’t answered your question properly, but I got into a passion and started yelling. Sorry.

12) What do you think of “confessional” poetry? How do you see your own work fitting and resisting that label?

Confessional poetry, of course, depends upon who does it. I think that most brag too much on themselves or don’t know how to laugh properly. Does that sound bitchy? Well, I mean, examine it and see. Even Whitman.

I really do think that most of my confessional stuff relieves itself as a form of entertainment. Meaning, look, I lost my balls or my love, ha ha ha. So forth. But the ha ha ha must be fairly relevant and real, I mean no Bob Hope stuff, so forth.

I find that when the pain gets bad enough there are only three things to do —get drunk, kill yourself or laugh. I usually get drunk and laugh.

Yeh. I don’t always do the confessional stuff but I suppose I am hooked on it, it comes easy because much has happened, I almost MAKE much happen—as if to create a life to create an art. I don’t think this is the true way to do things, it is probably a weakness, but I am a dreamer and maybe a dramatist and I like more things to happen than happen—so I push them a bit. I suppose it’s not right. I don’t claim to be.

13) What do you think of college kids reading poetry? Why do they do it? Do they read you? Do they read poetry for what you consider valid

reasons? (That last verges on being an asinine question, but you might be able to redeem it with a clever answer.)

Now you know I don’t think of college kids reading poetry. I don’t know if they do or if they read me. There’s no clever way to answer this without making up something I don’t know and which I can’t get away with, so I’m being more clever this way.

14) What’s so great about living in L.A.?

I’m here to begin with and then you build around that. Or I build around it. I’ve lived most of my life here and I’ve simply gotten used to the place. I can’t even get lost, sober. And just the other day I found out where the L.A. Zoo was. And the women here seem to love old men. I’ve never seen women like that. At the same time, I’m suicidal and there’s the smog to help me out. So, what do you got in *****Ohio?

15) What are you reading now? What are your reading habits?

I’m not reading anything. Well, I write my own things and I read them. I suppose that’s a habit.

16) If you were suddenly to become wealthy, how would your life change?

I would become wiser, more profound and more lovely.

17) Do you have any children?

I have a girl aged 7. She’s all right.

I mailed the questions and answers in and I didn’t expect much but I got, in the return mail, a letter from Jack M—

Dear Buk:

All right! That was good medicine (your response to my questions). I don’t think it’ll be right for the REVIEW, though. That isn’t what I had in mind, and my questions didn’t lead into the sort of literary (prosodic & technical) matters that we like for our Interviews with Poets series. (These would have been questions about your sense of the line, your opinion of other poets—specifically, and other matters that I suspect you might consider pure crap.)

Anyway, I’ve forwarded the interview thing to the editors, and they’ll of course give it the eye. (One other thing: we’re filled up with interviews already, through next year.)

My reason was, as I explained, to get information for my own article on you and your work—something that I can peddle elsewhere. I've already written this article, and I think it's a dandy. When it comes out, wherever that is, it'll help you somewhat, surely . . . but of course, my motive isn't altruistic—I simply like your poems a great deal, and think they should be better known than they are.

Enough of that. Now I WOULD like to ask you, specifically and formally, to send us some poems for the ****REVIEW. We pay something like $10.00 to $15.00 a poem.

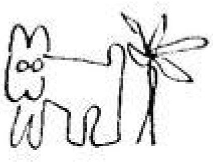
I've ordered HUMMINGBIRD and have read the broadsheet sent out by Black Sparrow Press.

Did I tell you that I enjoyed my brief visit there? I did, and indeed, as you'll guess when you read the essay that came of it.

Cheers,
Jack M—

Dear Jack M—;
Well, & ( ) (therefore) &
(do you understand)?
(your visit was hardly wasted)
(at this end) (either) &

Cheers to you,
Charlie B.



Pete was 13, a difficult age they say, but any age is, and Pete had parents of German extraction, strict, very. "A child should be seen and not heard," was one of their dictums, and that was all right with Pete. He disliked his parents immensely. His father beat him regularly with a razor strop for minor infractions of rules while his mother stood by and said, "The father is always right."

At times, at night, sometimes when his parents were fucking, Pete would be thinking, alone in his bedroom, “These can’t be my parents. I must have been adopted. I must have been kidnapped.”

Actually Pete had been the reason for the marriage. His father had gotten his mother pregnant and the old man had always held the marriage against him, but Pete thought, with some repugnance, that *he* hadn’t stuck that thing in there. And he thought, with further repugnance, can it be that I was once partly jissom in that man’s cock? The thought sickened him.

Pete had to mow the lawn twice a week, front and back, once in one direction and once in another each time. In other words he mowed the lawn over *four* times a week, trimmed the edges and watered. The neighbors remarked what a nice lawn his parents had.

It was after his lawn-mowing sessions that his father would get down on the grass and “inspect for hairs.” His father would put his eye level to the grass and if he found one grassblade standing taller than the others that was the reason for a razor stropping in the bathroom. And his father would always find a hair. “Ah, I see it! A hair!” And his mother would come to the back window and say, “Your father found a hair, you bad boy!” And Pete would walk to the bathroom where his father would be waiting, sitting on the edge of the tub, strop ready, his face working into a red fury.

After the age of 12 Pete no longer screamed when he was whipped; it was an admission of pain and he didn’t want to admit pain to his father, he refused. The beatings became so brutal that he was unable to sit on an ordinary chair for dinner, he had to sit on two pillows and listen to his father recount the day at work, which was always very similar:

“I told that son of a bitch Cranston off today. He let his station go unnoticed while he talked to this blonde. It must have gone on for 20 minutes. I walked over and told him, ‘Listen, Cranston, your job isn’t to talk to blondes, it’s to guard the museum facilities. You straighten out or I’ll report you to Mr. Henderson!’ Then I walked off. That blonde got out of there.

“Cranston kept giving me dirty looks all day. You know, they robbed his area two weeks ago, got right under a glass case while he was there and lifted out all the coins. They dated way back, must have been worth three or four thousand dollars. Why they dug those coins out of there while his ass was turned. He’s asleep on his feet.

“Also I put a suggestion in the suggestion box—that those World War I planes be taken out of the cellar and put on a higher floor. There’s a dampness down there and the dampness causes a mildew that is beginning to eat into the fabric of the planes. They need a drier area . . .”

His father talked for hours about the job, he only talked about his job. He went to bed at 8 p.m. every night so that he would be “fresh and ready for the job.” That meant lights out for everybody else and bed. But his father always talked on about the job and his mother would answer, “Oh, yes. Oh, yes, I think you’re right. Oh, I’m glad you told him! He said *that*? And what did you say?”

The only thing that interrupted them was their once-a-week fuck and Pete would have to listen to the bed squeaking, the walls being thin. Pete would envision his father mounted, going through the motions, and it would sicken him, that he belonged to these people, that there wasn’t any escape . . . wouldn’t be, for years.

It was after this particular night, after a stropping for missing a “hair,” and after listening to their automatic lovemaking that he had a dream. His mother and his father were sitting in the breakfast nook eating their dinner when a huge spider, blackish-brown, with most powerful fangs and two large yellow-green eyes walked into the breakfast nook. The spider was a good three feet in circumference, very hairy and gave off the odor of distant blood. While his father was talking about the job the spider got up on the ceiling, then dropped down on a single thread of its web and began to spin a net about his mother. His father failed to notice. When the spider had his mother completely in his web he moved down and sunk his fangs into her breasts, then lifted her high into his web and left her dangling above the table. Then the spider simply leaped from his web, grabbed his father with his spider legs and sunk his fangs home. The spider then lifted his father from the chair to the table and sat there above him, sucking the blood from his body.

Pete awakened then. He walked down the hall and looked into his parents’ bedroom. They were each asleep in their twin beds. He went back to bed and slept and had no further dreams that he could remember.

The next day was Monday and a day, finally, of no duties. Pete stayed after school and got into a baseball game. He didn’t get much practice but he was a good athlete. He got a homer and a triple and made three great catches in the outfield. Then he went home. When he got there his mother was angry. “Go to your bedroom. Your father will talk to you when he gets home.”

An hour later he heard his mother talking to his father. Then his father entered the bedroom and closed the door.

His father had a different look on his face than he had ever seen before, more furious, more brutal, less understanding. Pete sat on the bed and waited. His father sat on a chair, facing him.

“Peter.”

“Yes?”

“What have you been doing?”

“Playing baseball.”

“What have you *really* been doing, Peter?”

“I don’t understand.”

“*You* understand.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You son of a bitch, I’ll kill you! You ever do that again and I’ll kill you!”

“What? Do what?”

“Here! Your mother showed me *these*! Look! Look!”

His father showed him a pair of pajama pants, the ones Pete had slept in last night. Pete still didn’t understand.

“Look! Look!” His father pointed to a place on the pajamas on the upper front. There was a small and faded spot of blood.

“What have you been doing, Peter?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, if you ever do that again, I’ll kill you!”

His father got up from his chair, walked to the door, slammed it violently and then Pete was alone. He looked down at the blood spot on the pajamas. Then he realized that the pajama pants were an old pair of his father’s. And that the blood spot was an old one that had failed to wash out properly. He sat there slightly amazed. They had conceived the blood spot to be something evil when actually it had been put there by his father or his mother. But what had they thought it had meant? Did they think that one bled during masturbation? It must have been their thought. For the first time he began to believe that his parents were crazy, or if not crazy, then ignorant beyond belief.

He was made to go without dinner that night and the next morning over breakfast they neither spoke to him or looked at him. After his father had gone to work his mother did mention that God might forgive him if he were good and repented for the rest of his life . . .

That night, after dinner, Pete was made to go immediately to his room and to bed. He turned out the lights and listened to his father talking about the job. God. His mother and God. His father and God. They believed in God. Is that what happened to people who believed in God? His mind flattened and turned, drifted. He slept and awakened. He still heard the voices of his parents.

Then Pete spoke: “God, you have given me such parents! How can You give me such parents? What type of God are you? God, I hate you! If You come down here in this room, God, I’ll punch you right in the nose!”

It seemed to Pete that he slept again then. When he awakened there appeared to be a figure looking at him over his knees. Pete’s legs were bent, the knees and blankets forming a small hill over which the figure peered back at him. The figure appeared dressed in black, all black, hooded, with a peaked cap similar to those worn by the Ku Klux Klan.

Pete was frightened, he looked back in disbelief. Could that be God? That hooded figure? Was God evil? The figure remained and remained and remained, looking at him. It must have stayed ten minutes, fifteen minutes, then it vanished.

Pete gathered himself and turned on the light. He kept wondering about the figure. He walked over to his dresser, opened the top drawer and took out the small box his grandmother had given him. She called it The Answer Box. Whenever you wanted to know anything you asked a question to God and He answered through The Answer Box. The box contained little scrolls of paper rolled up and set next to each other. There were many tiny rolls.

Pete asked the question. What happened then... ? He reached in and pulled out one of the rolls, unrolled it and read: “God has forsaken you.” He rolled up the paper, placed in back in the box, put the box back in the drawer and then went to bed.

He could still hear his parents talking in the breakfast nook. Then Pete got up and opened the dresser drawer again. He took The Answer Box out again and unrolled the little slips one by one. He couldn’t find the slip that had said “God has forsaken you.” He put all the slips back, closed the box and returned it to the drawer. He could no longer hear his parents talking. It was unusual.

Pete slowly opened his bedroom door and listened. The light was on in the breakfast nook but there was no sound. He walked down the hall in his pajamas and his bare feet. He walked into the kitchen. Still there was no sound. Then he walked into the breakfast nook.

The spider was there, that huge blackish-brown spider, huge fangs and two large yellow-green eyes . . . the blood sack was hairy and pulsating and full with blood and the spider was upon his father on the tabletop. His mother was in a large web above the table, dead.

Pete walked back to his bedroom, closed the door and got dressed in his day clothes. Then he climbed through the back bedroom window and dropped into the yard. The grass was neatly-mowed and well-kept. He walked into the garage and found a gallon can of turpentine. His father used it to clean his paint brushes in. Pete took the can in through the back porch. Then he opened it and let the liquid run in under the door and into the kitchen. He emptied a remainder of the can about the back porch. Then he took a loose piece of newspaper, slightly rolled, and lit it with a match. He threw it into the center of the back porch. He saw the flames rise up, he saw the flames run under the door and light up the kitchen.

Then he walked up the driveway and out onto the street. He walked north along the street and up the long hill to the boulevard. Then he turned and looked back. He could see the flames, the flames were very high down there. Then he walked east. He walked three blocks east until he got to the movie. He looked in his pockets. He had enough for a movie. It was a Western. A real good shoot-’em-up. Pete loved Westerns. He paid the girl and walked in. He had enough for a bag of popcorn. He bought a bag of popcorn and walked down the dark aisle. He found a seat about three-fourths of the way in the back, near the center, sat down and began to eat the popcorn. Two guys were about to shoot it out, right in front of a saloon. They were good actors. Pete liked popcorn, popcorn with plenty of salt. At last, he was happy.

Robert had 29 cans of food in the closet and a five gallon jug of Sparkletts. Also, candles and a .32 with plenty of shells. The water had been cut off the second day but the power was still on.

What had started as a series of spontaneous riots had evolved into something that nobody quite understood. All stores, gas stations—supplies of every sort had been looted in the first days.

In a sense, it was a nationwide revolution but exactly who was revolting and who wasn't—the matter wasn't clear. The fire department, after numerous casualties, had ceased to put out fires. Half of Los Angeles was on fire—people were homeless—men, women, children—hiding where they could. They were not roaming, but hiding, trying to hide, trying to exist.

The police, the National Guard and the U.S. Army attempted to control the streets—and control meant killing all others who were upon them. Basically it had become a war between the uniformed and the non-uniformed; and worse, through fear, had evolved into a war between black and white and a war between white and white and black and black and all the colors in between. Each man seemed a unit divided until something happened. The revolution had no central leadership, and so its demands and ambitions were hazy. There seemed no way it could surrender; there also seemed no way it could win.

Robert could understand neither the revolutionaries or the government; both left him with more than a bad taste. But he had always been an odd guy, not fitting anywhere. Now it had broken down into Man against Man, which it had always been, but now it was clear—they were back to the caves, and every man, beast, every weather was the enemy. The centuries had burned back down.

Luckily, Robert had three fifths of Scotch and three-fourths of a lid of grass and ten packs of Bull Durham and plenty of Zig Zag, all of which helped the spirit. Also, he was a natural loner and, all in all, the situation which existed was not far from the one he had existed in before the revolution. His greatest joy had always been solitude, albeit cut with an occasional piece of ass, a bit of Mahler or Stravinsky, a joint or two and a good night's drunk.

The gas and water were shut off and he had all the windows nailed closed and kept the night latch on the door. Late at night he would open the door and throw out his excretia and urine, all the garbage. It was more dangerous to go out and attempt to bury it.

Constant firing was heard in the streets. Bodies were left where they fell. Rats, dogs, cats prowled the streets, ripping pieces of flesh off dead bodies. Maggots and flies were everywhere.

Robert knew it wouldn't be long before the electricity went. He turned on the radio. (He had never purchased a t.v. set.) Some of the radio stations were replaying the President's message over and over. For all he knew the President was dead, but he still heard the message over and over:

"My fellow Americans: Never has this great nation been in such agony and fear and chaos, but we will come through, and after this is over we will cleanse our ranks of the cowards and back-stabbers who have weakened us. We will be a greater nation than ever before.

"Growth is oftentimes accompanied by pain. At this moment we are feeling this pain, we are feeling it very much. But, listen, we will grow to an even greater Manhood. We will rid our land of this pestilence and of these pests. We will rid our land of the insects that have sucked our blood.

"Have faith: God and Country will prevail. Have faith, I beg of you, and this hour will not be our death but our rebirth into greater freedom, a greater freedom than any ever known to Man in the history of the world.

"Meanwhile, it is my duty to inform you that two nations, Russian and China, have banded together and given us an ultimatum. This ultimatum being that we will have until Oct. 25 to surrender all our governmental powers over to them. The United States of America has never surrendered and we do not intend to do so now. Should Russia or China, either or both, attempt any invasion or any move at all which we shall consider hostile we will release immediately upon them our nuclear force, which at this time is four times greater than all the combined nuclear power of all the nations on earth.

"The United States of America, troubled from within and without, will persevere. Don't doubt Her unless you doubt your very own soul. God, Might and Freedom will shine throughout the World tonight, tomorrow and forever.”

Robert turned the dial.

“. . . and this station is still in control of the rebels! Brothers, this hour is ours! This is Truth, at last, come face to face with the imprisonment of Man, with the materialistic and spiritual degradation of Man. This Revolution, this effort of ours, cannot be compared to any revolution in the history of the world. For, at last, Man has awakened to what he wants, and what he really wants is the freedom to form and live his life in any damned way he pleases—to wear the clothes he wishes to, to fuck in the streets, to smoke pot, to paint, to do nothing or something or everything. We demand materialistic needs if we need them and we demand spiritualistic needs, which are forever needed. The eight-hour job be damned! Our job, and it isn’t a job at all—is to enjoy life as we wish it. But some of us must die first, many of us must, so those of us who are left will be able to live as humans instead of as driven beasts. The spirit of Man has risen at last to swallow his subnormal keeper! Damn the President of the United States, and damn and break this torture chamber which has enslaved us all too long! Right on!”

Robert turned off the radio. He walked into the bedroom, stretched out on the bed and jacked-off. He wiped off on the sheet, got up, decided that he was hungry, but he was strictly rationing himself. He decided upon a can of cold beans. He walked to the refrigerator and opened the door. The inside light didn’t go on. He walked over to a lightswitch and flipped it to on. No overhead light. Back in the front room the radio didn’t work. The power was off. He had four boxes containing 12 candles each. But darkness was better and it was night. He forgot the beans and sat down, rolled a smoke. He listened to the shooting. He sat there perhaps an hour when he heard a knock on the door.

“Brother,” Robert heard a voice, “brother, help me!”

He sat still.

“Brother, brother help me! Mercy! God o’ mighty, isn’t there any mercy in your soul? Oh, Jesus!”

It sounded like an old man. Robert took the latch off the .32 and walked up behind the door.

“Yeah?”

“Brother, please! God o’ mighty!”

Robert opened a small side panel near the door. It was an old white-haired guy, maybe in his late 60’s or early 70’s. He was in rags, flat upon his belly on the porch.

“Brother! I’m dying! A cup of water! I beg you! Only a cup of water and I’ll go!”

“Will you go then?”

“Yes, yes! Believe me!”

Robert opened the door. The old guy began to crawl forward. The door was only open a notch. The old guy tried to push the door open wide with his arm. Robert looked up in time to see three young guys rush from around a hedge. He fired. The leading guy screamed, grabbed his belly and fell forward. Then Robert kicked the old guy in the mouth, pushed his head out the door and got the latch on just before the other two guys, who had paused a moment, hit the door. Robert’s door had been glass, but he had braced it partially with boards. The shade was down. Robert pulled the shade up, dropped to his belly, saw a piece of one of the guys through the boards and glass, fired. He got him in the chest. The other guy leaped off the porch. Robert couldn’t see the old man. The phone rang. Robert walked over and picked it up.

“Robert Grissom?” somebody asked.

“Grissom isn’t here,” Robert said.

“Come on, Bobby, we’ve got you by the balls.”

“What?”

“CIA, Bobby, your game is up.”

“I don’t understand. I thought the power was off. How can you phone me?”

“Don’t worry your ass, Bobby. We’ve got you by the balls.”

“I’ve always been apolitical.”

“There’s no such thing as ‘apolitical,’ Bobby baby, there’s only such a thing as facing it or not facing it.”

“You’re wrong,” Robert said. “I don’t think a man has to be a registered Democrat in order to go to hell.”

“We’ve found some things in your writings, Bobby.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, there’s a lot of that, too. You didn’t think we were watching you, eh Bobby? You thought you could feed us that ‘apolitical’ bullshit, huh? Well, we happen to know who you’re pulling for, kid.”

“’Kid’? I’m 55. In fact, today is my . . . ”

“We know, Bobby, we’re coming right over with your birthday cake.”

Robert hung up.

He pulled down all the shades except for a small peek-through area at the bottom of each, got down flat on his belly with the .32 and with all his shells around him. Then he got up and got the can of urine out of the bathroom and put several rags next to it. He’d learned an old trick—urinate on a handkerchief, hold it over the nose and you strain out a great deal of poisonous gas.

“GRISSOM, COME ON OUT! YOU HAVE 60 SECONDS!”

Robert lifted the .32 and shot out of the side window. He heard a scream. The impossible had happened. He had hit somebody.

The first canister of gas came lobbing into the room. Robert picked up his shells and the rags and the can of urine, ran into the bedroom, closed the door and climbed under his bed. He dipped the rag into the can of urine and put it over his nose and mouth. The ultraviolet ray glasses were already taped around his skull. It was an attempt to seal the eyes from any possible tear gas.

And there under the bed he grinned just a bit and watched the bedroom door for whoever wanted to be an immediate part of chapter one in the History of the Second American Revolution.

Down there under the bed he noticed that he wasn’t a very good housekeeper: several missing stockings, an undershirt, various gatherings of dust. It was one hell of a way to end a literary career: not one pair of panties, a love letter or a box of Tampax about. And the Pulitzer Prize looked more impossible than ever . . .

We were both in handcuffs. The cops led us down the stairway between them and sat us in back. My hands were bleeding onto the upholstery, but they didn’t seem to care about the upholstery.

The kid’s name was Albert and Albert sat there and said, “Jesus, you guys mean you’re going to take me and lock me up where I can’t get candy and cigarettes and beer, where I can’t listen to my record player?”

“Stop your sniveling, will you?” I asked the kid.

I hadn’t made the drunk tank for six or eight years. I was due, I was overdue. It was just like driving that long without a traffic ticket—they were just going to get you finally if you drove and they were going to get you finally if you drank. On drunk tank trips vs. traffic tickets the drunk tank led by 18 to seven. Which shows I’m a better driver than I am a drinker.

It was the city jail and Albert and I got separated in the booking. The routine hadn’t changed except the doctor asked how my hands got cut.

“A lady locked me out,” I said, “so I smashed the door in, a glass door.”

The doctor put one band-aid on the worst cut and I was led to the tank.

It was the same. No bunks. Thirty-five men laying on the floor. There were a couple of urinals and a couple of toilets. Ta, ta, ta.

Most of the men were Mexican and most of the Mexicans were between 40 and 68. There were two blacks. No Chinese. I have never seen a Chinese in a drunk tank. Albert was over in the corner talking but nobody was listening, or maybe they were because once in a while somebody would say, “Jesus Christ, shut up, man!”

I was the only one standing up. I walked over to one of the urinals. A guy was asleep with his head against the urinal. The guys were all around the urinals and crappers, not using them but sitting crowded around them. I didn’t want to step over them so I awakened the guy by the urinal.

“Listen, man, I want to piss and your head is right up against the urinal.”

You can never tell when that will mean a fight so I watched him closely. He slid over and I pissed. Then I walked to within three feet of Albert.

“Got a cigarette, kid?”

The kid had a cigarette. He took it out of the pack and threw it at me. It rolled along the floor and I picked it up.

“Anybody got a match?” I asked.

“Here.” It was a skid row white. I took the matchbook, struck up a smoke and handed it back.

“What’s the matter with your friend?” he asked.

“He’s just a kid. Everything’s new to him.”

"You better keep him quiet or I'm going to punch him out, so help me, I can't stand his babble."

I walked over to the kid and kneeled down beside him.

"Albert, give it a rest. I don't know what kind of shit you were on before you met me tonight but all your sentences are fragmented, you're making bad sense. Give it a rest."

I walked back to the center of the tank and looked around. A big guy in grey pants was laying on his side. His pants were ripped up the crotch and the shorts were showing through. They'd taken our belts so we couldn't hang ourselves.

The cell door of the tank opened and a Mexican in his mid-forties staggered in. He was, as the saying goes, built like a bull. And gored like one. He walked into the tank and did some shadow boxing. He threw some good ones.

Both of his cheeks, up high, near the bone had raw red gashes. His mouth was just a blot of blood. When he opened it all you could see was red. It was a mouth to remember.

He threw a couple more, seemed to miss a hard one, lost balance and fell over backwards. As he fell he arched his back so when he hit the cement the ball of his back took the blow, but he couldn't hold his head back up, it snapped back from the neck, the neck almost acted as a lever and the rear of his head was hurled against the cement. There was the sound, then the head bounced back up, then fell down again. He was still.

I walked over to the tank door. The cops were walking around with papers, doing things. They were all very nice-looking fellows, young, their uniforms very clean.

"Hey, you guys!" I yelled. "There's a guy in here needs medical attention, bad!"

They just kept walking around doing their duties.

"Listen, do you guys hear me? There's a man in here needs medical attention, bad, real bad!"

They just kept walking around and sitting, writing on pieces of paper or talking to each other. I walked back into the cell. A guy called to me from the floor.

"Hey, man!"

I walked over. He handed me his property slip. It was pink. They were all pink.

"How much I got in property?"

"I hate to tell you this friend, but it says 'nothing.'"

I handed his slip back.

"Hey, man, how much I got?" another guy asked me.

I read his and handed it back.

"You're the same; you've got nothing."

"What do you mean, nothing? They took my belt. Isn't my belt something?"

"Not unless you can get a drink for it."

"You're right."

"Doesn't anybody have a cigarette?" I asked.

"Can you roll one?"

"Yeah."

"I got the makings."

I walked over and he handed me the papers and some Bugler. His papers were all stuck together.

"Friend, you've spilled wine all over your papers."

"Good, roll us a couple. Maybe we can get drunk."

I rolled two, we lit up and then I walked over and stood against the tank door and smoked. I looked at them all laying there motionless upon the cement floor.

"Listen, gentlemen, let's talk," I said. "There's no use just laying there. Anybody can lay there. Tell me about it. Let's find something out. Let me hear from you."

There wasn't a sound. I began to walk around.

"Look, we're all waiting for the next drink. We can taste the first one now. To hell with the wine. We want a cold beer, one cold beer to start it out with, to wash the dust out of the throat."

"Yeah," said somebody.

I kept walking around.

"Everybody's talking about liberation now, that's the thing, you know. Do you know that?"

No response. They didn't know that.

"All right, I say let's liberate the roaches and the alcoholics. What's wrong with a roach? Can anybody tell me what's wrong with a roach?"

"Well, they stink and they're ugly," said some guy.

"So's an alcoholic. They sell us the stuff to drink, don't they? Then we drink it and they throw us in jail. I don't understand. Does anybody understand this?"

No response. They didn't understand.

The tank door opened up and a cop stepped in.

"Everybody up. We're moving to another cell."

They got to their feet and walked toward the door. All except the bull. Me and another guy walked over and picked the bull up. We walked him out the door and down the aisle. The cops just watched us. When we got to the next tank we laid the bull down in the center of the floor. The cell door shut.

"As I was saying . . . well, what was I saying? O.K., those of us who have money, we bail out, we get fined. The money we pay is used to pay those who arrested us and kept us confined, and the money is used to enable them to arrest us again. Now, I mean, if you want to call that justice you can call it justice. I call it shit down the throat."

"Alcoholism is a disease," said some guy from flat on his back.

"That's a cliché," I said.

"What's a cliché?"

"Almost everything. O.K., it's a disease but we know they don't know it. They don't throw people with cancer in jail and make them lay on the floor. They don't fine them and beat them. We're the roaches. We need liberation. We should go on parades: 'FREE THE ALCOHOLIC.'"

"Alcoholism is a disease," said the same guy from flat on his back.

"Everything's a disease," I said. "Eating's a disease, sleeping's a disease, fucking's a disease, scratching your ass is a disease, don't you get it?"

"You don't know what a disease is," said somebody.

"A disease is something that's usually infectious, something that's hard to get rid of, something that can kill you. Money is a disease. Bathing is a disease, catching fish is a disease, calendars are a disease, the city of Santa Monica is a disease, bubblegum is a disease."

"How about thumbtacks?"

"Yeah, thumbtacks too."

"What isn't a disease?"

"Now," I said, "now we got something to think about. Now we got something to help us pass the night."

The cell door opened and three cops came in. Two of them walked over and picked up the bull. They walked him out. That broke our conversation somehow. The guys just laid there.

"Come on, come on," I said, "let's keep it going. We'll all have that drink in our hand soon. Some sooner than others. Can't you taste it now? This isn't the end. Think of that first drink."

Some of them laid there thinking about that first drink and some of them laid there thinking about nothing. They were resigned to whatever happened. In about five minutes they brought the bull back in. If he had gotten medical attention it wasn't noticeable. He fell again but this time on his side. Then he was quiet.

"Look, gentlemen, cheer up, for Christ's sake, or for my sake. I know they treat a murderer better than a drunk. A murderer gets a nice cell, a bunk, he gets attention. He's treated like a first-class citizen. He's really done something. All we've done is empty a few bottles. But cheer up, we'll empty some more . . ."

Somebody cheered. I laughed.

"That's better. Look up, look up! God's up there with a couple of six packs of *Tuborg*. Cold and chilled they are with tiny icy bubbles glistening on the side . . . think of it . . ."

"You're killing me, man . . ."

"You'll be out, we'll be out, some sooner than others. And we won't rush out to an AA meeting and take the 12 great steps back to infancy! Your *mother* will get you out! Somebody loves you! Now which mother's boy of us will get out of here first? That's something to think about . . ."

"Hey, man . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Come here."

I walked over.

"How much I got?" he asked. He handed me his property slip. I handed it back.

"Brother," I said, "I hate to tell you . . ."

"Yes?"

"It says 'nothing,' a very neatly typed 'nothing.'"

I walked back to the center of the tank.

"Now look, fellows, I'll tell you what I'll do. Everybody take out your property slips and throw them in a pile in the center of the floor. I'll pay a quarter for each pink slip . . . I'll own your souls . . ."

The door opened. It was a cop.

"Bukowski," he announced, "Henry C. Bukowski."

"Be seeing you fellows. It's my mother."

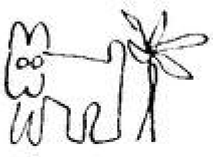
I followed the cop on out. The checkout was fairly efficient. They simply extracted $50 for bail (I'd had a good day at the track) and gave me the rest, plus my belt. I thanked the doctor for his band-aid and followed the cop into the waiting room. I'd made two calls out while being booked. I was told I had a ride. I sat for ten minutes and then a door opened and I was told I could go. My mother was sitting on a bench outside. It was Karen, the 32-year-old woman I lived with. She was trying her damnedest not to be angry but she was. I followed her on out. We got to the car and got in and started off. I looked in the glove compartment for a cigarette.

Even the city hall looks good when you get out of the tank. Everything looks good. The billboards, the stoplights, the parking lots, the bus stop benches.

"Well," said Karen, "now I suppose you'll have something to write about."

"Oh, yeah. And I gave the fellows a good show. The fellows are going to miss me. I'll bet it's like a tomb in there . . ."

Karen didn't appear to be impressed. The sun was about to come up and the lady on the billboard, one strap down on her bathing suit, smiled at me as she advertised a sun tan lotion.



Walden, shit, well I'm writing this in King's Pasture, Utah, no transport, no racetrack, no beer, no Cal Worthington, no love letters from insane ladies in Michigan, Louisiana, New Jersey . . . no poetry readings, no nudie bars . . . My few aficionados who expect tales of drunken nights, child-rape, woman rape, jail, murder—the general calm madness of Hollywood and Los Angeles, will have to wait.

As I write this I fight off a few mosquitoes but, by comparison to the average person, they don't contact me too often. The alcoholic content of my blood gives them pause, but the few who get a nip of me whir off singing.

I stare right off into 40,000 trees and not a toteboard in sight. But I gather no mental clarity or insight.

I suppose that I am terribly inbred to my prejudices. I find my prejudices comforting; I find my ignorances comforting. I have no desire to be an intelligent man and I have succeeded. Intelligent men bore me with their understanding, with their deep-set knowledgeable eyes, with their vocabularies, with all and everything they know. I prefer a slower seasoning.

So many people are doomed by their ambition and their gathered intelligence, their bank account and savings and loan intelligence. If there is any secret to life, that secret is not to try. Let it come to you: women, dogs, death, and creation.

In writing, especially, there are many fast starters. All men are born artists but most of them are quickly mutilated. Ambition is bad enough but when an obscene ambition gets connected with a commercial recognition it's not long before the shit backs up in the sewer. Creation means creation without attachment; too many imagine it means a house in Beverly Hills, a red sports car, talk shows, and going to bed with all offers . . .

One could write such a thing without staring at 40,000 trees. I came up here because my woman said there were wildmen in the forest with Wilt Chamberlain peckers who hadn't been laid for years. I have no idea how many wildmen she has met . . .

There was a party in Escalante before we got up here. I furnished the beer and the cowboy-ranchers furnished the dancing. Those boys are in good shape. They lift their women (and mine) over their heads and whirl them about. They are pitiful drinkers but they can dance for hours. They can start a fire with wet wood, hitch and shod a horse, kill and skin deer, trap, fish, fight, and fuck. Their conversation isn't too bad either.

I'm no dancer. I'm a hermit who has spent most of his life in a tiny room with a bottle and a typewriter and an occasional woman. I admit to disliking crowds, crowds anywhere, and parties. I suppose there should be a meeting ground for most people, and a party, a dancing party, could be the place. But

I've seldom been to a party that didn't generate bad feelings. Basically the men are in too much of a rush to be on the make instead of allowing it to happen. Things become ugly, a contest, a push, a joust, a sham.

I got up and kicked my arms and my legs but I soon tired. I am in horrible shape. Also, I am a man who appreciates symphony music. When the ear and the mind become accustomed to classical music then the steady and almost invariable beat of the sound of popular music, turned top volume on the stereo, does dehydrate the inner gut. The very limitation and persistency of the sound is an insult to the senses.

So I found myself sitting on a rock in the desert, getting at the cans of beer I had brought out with me. I had been drinking for days and my stomach was raw. My jumping about and the sound of the music had made me ill. I stood up and started vomiting.

Carl, the owner of the ranch, was coming in from his car which was parked out on the road.

"Having trouble, man?" he asked me.

"I'm all right, Carl."

I let go another load.

"I'm staying right here with you," he said.

"It's all right, Carl, I've been through this a thousand times before."

I let go another batch.

"I'm standing over you," said Carl. "I'm standing over you tall and true until you're finished."

Carl stood over me tall and true until I was finished. Then we walked on inside where I opened another beer and I walked back into the front room where the full-blast stereo gutted the walls with the same limited notes. They danced and they leaped and I stood there with my can of beer and I watched, just to let them know that I knew what a good time was . . .

(I have just watched something murder something here on the ground. Ah, nature, beautiful nature, the beautiful animals and bugs, the beautiful people.)

My first night out in nature, down in lower camp, I had to go.

"What'll I do?" I asked my woman.

"You just shit in the bushes."

It was a more crowded camp, one of those roadside machinations, tourists abounding, so I had to put on my clothing. I wasn't entirely sober. I walked along and looked at the bushes.

I selected some. I got out of my bluejeans, hung them on a bush but before I could squat the beershit began; waterfalls began rolling down my legs—wetwash of stinking beer mildewed with improperly chewed and improperly digested food. I grabbed at a bush and squatted, pissed on my feet, and eliminated a few very soft turds.

My pants fell off the bush and onto the ground. I leaped up, worried about my wallet. And, of course, it had fallen out of my pants. I staggered about the brush looking for it and managed to step right into my excretia, me who had stolen the land from the Indians.

I found the wallet, put it back in my pants, hung it all very securely upon a bush and began to wipe myself. I wiped and I wiped. I wiped myself for 5 minutes, put my pants back on and walked back.

I undressed and got into the sleeping bag with my woman. She was asleep but not for long.

“Jesus Christ, what’s that?” she asked.

“What?”

“That stink!”

“I shit in the bushes.”

“Did you wipe yourself?”

“For 5 minutes.”

“What happened? You smell god-awful! What happened?”

“I’ll tell you in the morning.”

Then we slept. At least, I did. And to my few aficionados, don’t worry; I’ll soon be back in Los Angeles.

Linda was down. We’d left a zipper open in the tent flap and the mosquitoes had been on us all night. She was reading a book on sex. I had given her enough sex, grade-A, oral, spiritual and standard, but she was in an off mood. We were in the middle of 160 acres of mountain, trees, and pasture owned by five sisters. Linda was one of the sisters and Linda was down and I was far away from Hollywood Boulevard and Western. “Come on,” I said, “let’s take a dip in the beaver pond.” “You go ahead,” she said, not looking up, “I’ll be along later.”

Downs disturb me, especially when I can’t understand why. I took my red notebook and a fountain pen and began walking. I got up to the beaver pond, sat on a rock, opened the notebook, but nothing came. I took off my clothes and stepped into the pond. It was like icewater. My body looked white and ridiculous. I stepped forward into a two-foot hole and I was in up to my arm pits, chilled in swirling muddy water. I stepped out over rocks that cut my feet. I found a spot and bathed with the small bar of soap. Then I gave myself a shampoo. When I stepped out of the water the flies were on me. Mountain flies are not like city flies; mountain flies are energetic and angry, very angry. I got my clothing and shoes on and walked off with my red notebook, the flies following me, while I thought, “I wonder what’s wrong with Linda? I love her, doesn’t she know that? How can she cut her feelings off? Love is not something you flip about like a TV dial.”

I walked up over a hill of trees and looked back and saw the beaver pond. Then I was over the hill and into a bit of shade. I found a rock and sat down and opened the red notebook. I didn’t have stockings on. As I began to write I felt this stinging pain on my right foot. There was a cut across my feet and a huge fly had landed and was sucking into the cut. I reached down and brushed him off. I got up and the flies followed me.

Why in the hell can’t a woman love a man even if he makes mistakes? Being together is the miracle, being together and caring. Sleeping together, feet touching, legs touching. Being asleep and together. Only the strong can live alone, the strong and the selfish.

It’s good to eat with somebody, to listen to the rain with somebody, to get through Christmas and New Year’s and Labor Day with somebody, to see their ring of dirt in the bathtub, to look at a toilet they forgot to flush. And to have the sex get better and better . . . For Christ’s sake, what was wrong with that woman? Didn’t she understand?

I walked some distance and found another rock under another tree. I opened the notebook and began to write something. I just let the flies have me and I wrote. I wrote something very bitter about humanity and love and the human race. Sometimes such things work, especially if they jell up fundamental truths instead of various self-pities. It didn’t work. I tore the pages out. Even when I wrote about unhappy things I usually had to be happy when I wrote.

Then I heard a sound of water; it sounded like a waterfall. I got up and moved toward the sound. As I walked I heard Linda’s voice. She was hollering for me: “BUKOWSKI!” I kept walking. I decided not to answer.

If she calls once more, I’ll answer. She didn’t call again. I moved toward the water. Then I saw it. The water was coming out of a spring and spilling down over a row of rocks that came down a high cliff. It was a good sight. I sat down and watched it. Then I got down into the stream and had a drink.

I decided, on going back, not to go up over the hill but to go around the easy way. I took my notebook and began. It would bring me right back to camp. I walked along and the ground was soaked with many little streams. I had to change course to get around them. There seemed to be very much brush. The brush got thicker. I pushed through, often stepping into mudholes up to my ankles.

Then very quietly a voice entered into my brain:

You’re lost . . .

Oh, no, that would be too damned silly.

Silly or not, you’re lost.

I looked around and I was lost. It was that simple. A tiny emptiness entered through my bellybutton.

You’re lost and you’re a coward and a fool and this proves it. You don’t deserve to live. Linda’s right.

I pushed on through the brush, downhill, stepping into streams . . . I threw my red notebook away. A lost man doesn’t care about a red notebook. I was the man who had once wanted isolation; I was the man who had once fattened on isolation. Now I had it: mountains and trees and brush; nobody around.

I walked on. I climbed a barbwire fence. I felt it was not the thing to do. I did it. I walked on. I climbed another fence. I was more into nowhere. I was in the center of 160 acres. Mountains, trees.

At first there is panic, a rather clubbing sickness inside. Then one says, I’m lost. One says it several times. Then one adjusts to being lost. One says, I am lost. Well. I might die. Well. But the conclusion is hardly joyous. I began to think of Linda. If I ever get out of this, I will treat her so good, oh I will treat her so good.

I climbed another barbwire fence. I kept following a stream down the hill. Looking ahead I could see a large body of water. I left the stream and walked toward it. I found a road. The road had tire tracks on it. There was a small pier built over the water. I got under the pier and took my shoes off and bathed them in the water. I drank the water. Somebody had built that pier, some humans. They might return, those efficient humans, those humans I had once as much resented. They were clever sons of bitches and strong. I wasn't. That's why I wrote poems. And, shit, I hadn't finished my second novel yet. It was laying back in a drawer in Los Angeles. I could see the bit in *The Garfield County News*:

The minor poet Charles Bukowski, who had come to Utah to visit the King sisters, was found perished under the reservoir pier by Dale Barney, Bruce Wilson, and Pole Griffith. Mr. Bukowski was 52 years old and wrote a column, Notes of a Dirty Old Man, *which was published in Communist newspapers. He is survived by an eight-year-old daughter, Marina Louise Bukowski. Mr. Bukowski's red notebook was found, empty, 175 yards north and east of the campsite. Evidently the state of Utah did not inspire Mr. Bukowski.*

I put my shoes back on and walked out from under the pier and got on top of it and walked out toward the end. There were a couple of box-like contraptions which were locked and made of steel or a high-grade tin. Might be a telephone in there, I thought. I walked on to the road and found a large rock. I brought the rock back and smashed it against the lock. I skinned the knuckles of both hands, but I kept smashing the rock down. I really didn't expect the lock to open but it was something to do. I was most surprised when the lock snapped open. I opened the compartment and stuck my hand in. I immediately got an electric shock. There was a loose wire sticking up from what appeared to be some type of transformer.

I stood and looked into the box. The sun beat upon me and my feet were covered with blisters. It was the end of my sanity. Alone and lost in the world, unloved by my love . . . demented, appalled, the shit of my very soul stuck into my ears, I stood there and looked. A needle moved very slowly back and forth across a semi-circle of cardboard. There were four numbers written upon the cardboard:

One, two, three, four.

The needle moved very slowly back and forth across the numbers:

One, two, three, four.

I decided not to flood the reservoir. I put the lock back on and got down under the pier and bathed my feet again. Having finished that I put my shoes back on and walked down the road a bit. I came to a gate, walked through the curving side entrance and found a picnic ground. But it was a Tuesday. There was nobody there. There were pits for cooking but I had no matches and no food. But civilization had been there, my beloved mankind.

I found a half loaf of stale French bread in the dirt. It was grey and mouldy. I walked over to a garbage can and dug out the cellophane bag inside and wrapped my bread inside of it . . . Garbage cans . . . meant garbage men . . . Where were they? Sons of bitches were probably on strike. I took my bread and my cellophane bag and began walking back toward the reservoir. It occurred to me that in spite of the general nearness of humanity that it was still possible that I *could* die up there—exposure, panic, madness . . . The thought disgusted me. I was like any other dreamer—I wanted to die while being sucked-off by the 15-year-old neighbor girl while her parents were at Mass.

I walked back to the pier, hung my bread from a railing, went out to the road, and piled boulders in the way so that anybody who might drive by would have to stop. I had left camp about 10 a.m. I figured it to be about 1 p.m. The most difficult thing is waiting, especially when waiting is useless. They figured I was hidden in the mountains writing immortal poetry. I decided to walk inward on the road. Perhaps it led to camp, although it hardly seemed the road we had driven in on. We didn't have a car; we had been driven up and left. They were to return at a later date.

I began walking down the road. It was very hot. I walked slowly. I walked several miles. Then I screamed out, "Linda!" It was such a sad sound, bouncing and echoing.

For a moment I had the feeling of running off into the trees, screaming, crashing my head against tree trunks and boulders. But that hardly seemed very manly so I decided against it. A poem began to from in my mind as I walked along:

Imperfection breeds Charley
While other men love
Crack-wise
Ride broncos
Imperfection breeds Charley
While other men light fires
On vistas

Study Shakespeare
Discover uranium, oil,
Sex. . . .
Imperfection breeds Charley
While other men hit
600 home runs
shoot deer and panther
shoot lion, elephant and
man. . . . imperfection breeds
Charley

Then I decided, to hell with that poem, I'm not that bad. And I kept walking. I don't know how long I walked, two hours perhaps, but there was nothing but road and road and road. I saw three or four deer. My energy was getting very low and my city shoes were blistering my feet. I had made another bad move. I turned and had a two-hour walk back to help consume me. One does reflect at such times. One thinks of the city, of walking about in a room and listening to the radio, reading the race results. I thought about the poet Jeffers who said there were traps everywhere, that they'd even trapped God when He came to earth.

But my trap had been so inane, without glory or purpose. The sun was very hot and I should have sat in the shade and rested but I was disgusted with my stupidity and wouldn't allow myself that. Then I thought, it really isn't death that matters: it's dying in some sort of minor comfort that matters . . . where people can sign little papers and keep the flies off your body. I walked on. Then ahead of me in the road stood a small doe. It was just a little larger than a large dog. As I slowly approached, it just stood there and looked at me. I was so tired, so low-keyed, my soul in such a pissed-off state against itself that I gave off no rays at all. The doe just remained in the road looking at me and I moved closer and closer. It isn't going to move, I thought. What will I do? Then as I was almost upon it, it turned and ran, the rear end bounding up and down. I remembered one time I had been very near suicide when I was sitting on a high cliff over the water near San Diego. As I sat there, four squirrels slowly—well, not slowly but in their swift darts—yet it seemed slow—they approached me and they came right up to my feet as I sat there and I looked into their large brown eyes and they looked into mine. They didn't fear me and I wondered at them. It seemed to last many minutes; then I moved a bit and they ran back down the rocks.

Finally I was under my pier again, my feet in the water. My thirst didn't seem to end. I kept drinking water. I tried to sleep. It wasn't any good. I put my shoes back on and walked back to the other end of the road, the picnic grounds. There was nobody about. I tried to remember how far it was back to the nearest town. The drive up had been a long one, very long, over a hot narrow mountain road. If I made it, there wouldn't be much left of me. If I didn't make it at least it would be a form of action. I decided to stay another night and a day and start out the next night. I walked back and got under the pier again. But the inaction got to me. I hardly felt very clever under that pier. I put my shoes back on and walked back toward the picnic grounds again.

Then I saw a little girl walking along the road toward me. "HEY!" I yelled at her, "HEY!" She seemed frightened. I walked toward her, then stopped. "I won't hurt you! I'm lost! I'm lost!" I felt very foolish, for how can one get lost near a picnic grounds with signs around that say NO SMOKING and PLEASE PUT OUT ALL FIRES? "Where's your mother and father?" "Oh, they're in a red and white camper on the picnic grounds." I walked toward the picnic grounds. I saw the camper but I didn't see the people. "HEY!" I yelled. "HEY!"

Then I saw Linda standing there with blue curlers in her hair. Then I saw a man and a woman by the camper.

"Hi," Linda said to me.

"My god I'm glad to see you!" I said. "Did these people bring you up?" "No, I just got here."

The people at the camper were watching us. "He's a city boy," said Linda. "He got lost in the woods. I just found him."

I laughed. "I'm a city boy. I'm a city boy."

"Well, I'm glad you found your man," said the woman.

"Come on," said Linda. "Follow me."

She had her dog with her. She was a good 15 yards ahead of me. "Listen," I said, "I've been lost in the woods for eight hours. Don't I even get a kiss?" She waited and I walked up. She turned her cheek and I kissed her on the cheek. Then she walked on ahead. “I’m mad at you. I been thinking about a lot of the things you’ve done and said and I got mad at you.”

I walked along behind her, stumbling into holes, over rocks and fallen tree branches, into mudholes. “I thought I might die,” I said, “and I thought, well, at least I ate her pussy the last two nights we were together. It was the only comforting thought I had.”

“I think you got lost on purpose. I found your notebook a couple of blocks from camp. You didn’t even leave a note. You always leave a note. I thought, well, he’s really mad. All you had to do was look up and you could have seen the camp. You never look up.”

“Usually when I look up I don’t like what I see.”

“You’re always so negative,” she said, “always so negative.”

I followed along 15 yards behind. “I point things out to you, landmarks, but you don’t listen. You don’t listen to things, you don’t participate, you’re always so far off. Why didn’t you leave a note in your notebook?”

“I didn’t get lost on purpose.”

“I believe you did.”

“No, not at all.”

“Or I thought maybe you went over the mountain to get a drink. I thought maybe you’d gone mad for a drink.

“Look, you’ve found me now, we’re back together, Jesus Christ . . .”

We had to climb between and over old barbwire fences. I got stuck in one, three or four barbs stuck into the back of my shirt. My arm was too tired to reach up and pluck myself free. I just stood there between the strands. Linda waited. I couldn’t move. She walked back and lifted the top strand off my back and I got out and followed her.

She was always just a little too far ahead and gaining. The dog bounded ahead of her. I followed Linda’s ass. I’d followed that beautiful ass for three years; I figured another mile and one half through the wilderness wouldn’t be entirely impossible. “Now you’ll have something to write about,” she said looking back.

“Oh shit yes,” I said.

The mountains and the trees and the mudholes and the rocks and the barbs and the ass and the dog and me were everywhere.

I took Patricia to the fights at the Olympic, we were eight or nine rows back and began drinking beer. The opening amateur fights were the best, as usual, and it was hot in there and the beer was good. Patricia and I bet 50 cents each fight and let our loyalties be known, better and better known with each new beer.

By the time the six-rounder came around we were screaming things like, *“Kill ’im!” “Send ’im back to Japan! Remember Pearl Harbor!” “He couldn’t beat his grandmother’s wet panties with a fly swatter!”*

We screamed all through the six-rounder and through both 10-round feature matches. When it was over I was 50 cents ahead. I lit two cigars, gave one to Patricia and we walked out to her car.

On the way in we got into an argument of some sort. What it was about I have since forgotten but I think it was something about which was the greater invention, the elevator or the escalator? She let me out in front of my place and I wandered back through the banana trees and the polluted fishpond and went up the back stairway to Apt. #24 where I found a pint of Grand-Dad in the refrig and lucked onto some Stravinsky on KFAC and sat about drinking and listening.

Halfway through the bottle I remembered a lady in town who was reading the life story of Virginia Woolf. Now not everybody in Los Angeles sits around reading the life story of Virginia Woolf, especially an attractive lady with an eight-room apartment, good French wine and $400 a month alimony. I finished the Grand-Dad and decided to find out more about Virginia Woolf.

The lady was in and we sat and talked for 10 minutes and she didn’t bring out any French wine so I suggested that I might go to the liquor store. She said that might be fine, so I went. The small liquor store to the north was closed but the lady lived on a large boulevard so I went on down to the supermarket. The lady’s name was Nina. I mean the one who read the life of Virginia Woolf. Nina had told me that Virginia Woolf had led a very tragic life and she also told me of her suicide. I think that she told me that Virginia Woolf had walked into a river naked and drowned herself.

Anyhow, I came back with two six-packs in the bottle and a pint of Grand-Dad. I walked back up the boulevard and as I got near Nina's place I noticed Patricia's car parked outside. I thought, fine, I'll take Patricia up and introduce her to Nina. Patricia might like to hear about Virginia Woolf. As I got near Patricia's car, the door opened and she leaped out. She began swinging her purse at me. Her purse was a large furry contraption with very long straps. She whirled it around and around, banging it against my head and shoulders and sides screaming, "You S.O.B.! You S.O.B.! You S.O.B.!"

"So help me now," I said, "you just keep it up and I'll have to give you one! Men's lib, you know."

Patricia kept it up and I set the bag down. Just as I did she gave me a good one along the side of the head. It spun me off to one side and she made for the bag. She got hold of a beer bottle and crashed it down against the sidewalk. It exploded! A good cold beer. She got another one. POW! Another one. POW! In the bar across the street they were lined up against the blinds, peering out. POW!

I was too drunk to grab her.

"You bitch! I'll have to put you back in the madhouse!"

I couldn't catch her. She kept circling back to the bag. POW! POW! The moon was high. There wasn't a cruise car within two miles and nobody was phoning in. I rushed the paper sack, picked it up, hugged it to my chest and she gave me one against the back of the head. I dropped the bag and Patricia was upon it. She found the Grand-Dad and held it up in the air.

"Ah ha! You were going to drink this with her and then . . ."

She didn't let me answer. POW! There went Grand-Dad. Nina's door was open and she was standing halfway up the stairway and began swinging her purse at Nina, saying over and over, "He's *my* man! He's *my* man! He's *my* man!"

Then she came running out. She found another beer in the sack. "POW!" Then she leaped into her car and drove off.

I walked up the stairway. Nina was at the top of it. "That was Patricia," I said.

"My god, what's wrong with her?"

"I don't know. Do you have a broom?"

I took the broom outside and began sweeping up the glass. Well, Patricia had been in the madhouse but Nina had been in the madhouse, too. Almost every woman I knew had been in the madhouse. It didn't prove anything. I seemed to hear a sound near me. I looked around. Patricia had gotten her car up on the sidewalk and it was coming down upon me. I leaped up against the wall and the right fender scraped across my leg. Then she bounced off the sidewalk, into the street, made a left turn against a red light up on Los Feliz Boulevard and was gone.

I began sweeping up more glass. I gathered little piles of glass into my hands and carried them up the stairway to Nina who took them off somewhere. Then I went back down and swept up more glass.

Then as I was sweeping I heard breathing sounds. I looked up and Patricia was standing before me. She grabbed the broom out of my hand and broke it into three pieces. Then she ran inside the door and found two bottles of beer on the bottom step.

"Ha! You saved these to drink them, didn't you, ha?"

She took both bottles and ran outside. "POW!" There went one. I walked over and closed Nina's door. Patricia took the other bottle and threw it at the door. It went right through the glass window. It made a neat, round hole. I opened the door, walked in, closed it. I found the bottle one-third of the way up the stairway. It was unbroken. I unscrewed the cap and took a good drain. Nina was at the top of the stairway. "For god's sake, Bukowski, go *with* her! Go *with* her before she kills us all!"

"Ah, she's gone. I wanna hear about Virginia Woolf."

"Don't worry, she's out there."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

I finished the beer and walked down the stairway. I opened the door, closed it. Patricia was out there. She was sitting in her orange car. I opened the door and got in. She turned the key and the car started.

"You know," I said, "she's really a nice woman. She didn't deserve all that. She didn't deserve me and she didn't deserve you."

She pressed the pedal to the floor.

"Bukowski . . . ," she said.

"O.K.," I said, "let's die together."

She had it to the floor and even a Volks will gather speed after a while.

"Bukowski . . . ," she said.

"Yes?"

"You should never take me to the fights. All those guys fighting . . . it gets me too much in the mood."

We did, somehow, arrive at her place. We were too drunk for anything. We slept in each other's arms.

Ralph awakened to the sound of his wife's voice. It was two a.m. and dark, and quiet except for the sound of Judy's voice.

"Tommy," she said, "oh, Tommy, slam that big thing to me! Oh my god, Tommy, slam that thing to me!"

Ralph propped himself up on one elbow and looked at her. She had on a thin pink negligee and had kicked all the covers off.

"Oh! It's so *big*! And purple! Oh, Tommy!"

Tommy Carstairs was Ralph's best friend.

"Oh, Tommy! It's in, it's in! Move that goddamned thing! Put that snake to me, Tommy!"

Ralph put a hand on his wife's arm.

"Listen, Judy, for Christ's sake . . ."

"Oh, Tommy! Oh, my god, I LOVE YOU!"

Her legs were pulled back and up and then she began to have spasms.

"Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh . . ." Then she was still and stretched out her legs. She turned her head toward Ralph and with a little smile on her face she began to snore ever so gently.

"Judy," he said.

"Hey, listen, Judy . . ."

He reached over and shook his wife. Then he took her by the shoulder and twisted it.

"Ouch," she said. "For Christ's sake, what's the matter with you, you going crazy?"

Judy got out of bed and went to the bathroom. She flushed the toilet, lingered a moment and came out. Her hair was almost as pink as her nightgown and one long strand came down over the left eye, crossed the nose and hung there. She brushed it up and away and it fell back to the same location. She climbed back into bed, put the pillow up against her back and lit a cigarette.

"Judy," he said, "you were dreaming."

"So shit," she said, "that don't give you no right to break my shoulder."

"Do you remember your dream?"

"No, no frankly I don't."

"You were taking cock."

"Taking cock?" she laughed.

"From Tommy Carstairs."

"You're crazy."

"I didn't know he had a big purple cock."

"Does he? Who told you?"

"You did. In the dream."

"Look, Ralph, it's 2:30. Let's get some sleep."

"Some sleep, hell. I want to know what's going on."

"Nothing's going on."

"Nothing's going on, eh? 'Oh, Tommy! Oh, oh, Tommy, slam that big purple thing to me! It's in! It's in! Move it! Move it! Oh my God, I'm coming . . . ooooh, oooooooh, oooooh!'"

"Look, Ralph, I don't want to hear that shit. Have you been drinking?"

"Have I been drinking? You know I haven't been."

"You talk like a sick man."

"I'm telling you what I heard."

"All right, I don't know what you heard. A dream isn't reality."

"It can be a tipoff on reality."

"Well, I don't know about you, but I'm going to sleep."

Judy put out her cigarette, rebunched her pillow, turned her back to Ralph. It was a doublebed and the bedlight was still on.

"Listen, Judy . . ."

"Ralph, for Christ's sake . . ."

"I want to tell you something . . ."

"All right. Go ahead."

"If you want this Carstairs guy, go ahead."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I'll get out of the marriage."

"Listen, I'm not even *fond* of Carstairs . . . in fact, I hate him . . ."

"Hate and love are very close."

Judy sat up in bed quickly, both arms pressed down at her sides, the palms of her hands flat on the sheets.

"Listen, Ralph, what do you WANT? Are you trying to drive me crazy too? Just what do you WANT? I WANT TO KNOW WHAT YOU WANT!"

"Listening to that dream was very ugly to me, Judy, I love you . . . I did love you. I just wonder how you'd feel if I dreamt something like that and *you* heard it."

"You make too much of everything, you always did. You're the most jealous man I ever *did* meet! By god, now you're even jealous of my dreams! Can I help it what I dream?"

"Then you *did* dream it?"

"I said I didn't remember."

"How do I know it's something that didn't happen? How do I know it's something that you might want to happen?"

"Oh Ralph, I'm so sick of all of this! I'm your *wife*, I'm living with you!"

"If this Carstairs had anything at all I'd understand. Course, I don't know about his cock."

"I don't know about his cock either."

"I'll bet."

"Goddamn his cock."

Ralph reached up and turned the light off. He stretched out. Then he heard Judy stretch out. It was summer and one could hear the crickets. Usually the crickets brought a sense of peace. The police helicopter circled above looking for muggers and rapists. Minutes went by. Ten. Fifteen. Ralph was on his back. He felt Judy's hand. It crawled up over his leg like some small animal, then her fingers closed about his cock. He reached down and took her hand and moved it off. The hand crawled back and grabbed his cock again.

"Ralph," she said.

"Yeah," he said, "what the hell is it?"

"I love you."

"Oh shit," he said.

"I mean it. I love you."

"Women can really throw that word."

She began to massage his cock.

"Don't," he said. "Christ, I need a drink."

"There's a pint in the cupboard."

"There is?"

"Yes, I'll get it."

He heard Judy moving in the dark and reached up and turned on the light. While she was in the kitchen he remembered he had had some dreams too. And it hadn't always been Judy. Sex feelings were something that didn't always stay confined. It was fairly normal to like others. Judy came back with the drinks. They sat up in bed and sipped at them.

"Judy," he said.

"Yes?"

"Forget it. Forget everything I said. I got nervous. That goddamned job is killing me. My eyes hurt, my back hurts, my brain hurts. It's a drain. I get jumpy."

"All right," she said, "forget it. I understand."

They sat there and finished their drinks. Then Ralph got up and mixed two more. He came back with the drinks and got in bed with her.

"You know," he said, "I had a horrible dream once. I dreamt I had a sexual relationship with my mother. I kept trying to draw back in the dream but I finally went ahead. It was one of the hottest dreams I ever had."

"The shrinks probably have something quite unnerving to say about that dream."

"Yes, but the shrinks are almost always wrong."

"I know."

"Give me a cigarette, Judy."

"Sure."

She put the ashtray between them and they both smoked.

"Here we are, talking at 3 a.m. in the morning," he said.

"It's good," she answered, "it breaks things up."

"Sure. Hear the crickets?"

"Yes, I like them."

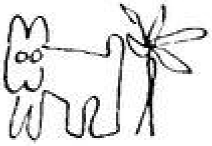
"I like them too"

"Ralph, if that job is killing you, give it up. We'll make it."

"No, it's all right. It was just a real rough day today. There aren't any good jobs. Everybody is fucked."

They finished their smokes and their drinks and Ralph turned the light out again. This time when Judy's hand arrived like a small animal he didn't push it away. His penis began to grow. He turned and kissed her, lifted her nightgown and gently ran a middle finger across the hairs down there. Something opened and he felt the wetness. Jesus, he thought, we are all so mixed up. It's all so sad and so wonderful.

Then they could still hear the crickets. Then they heard the siren of an ambulance. Then they heard the police helicopter again. Then they heard three dogs barking. Then they heard each other.



belles-lettres?

Dear Mr. B: How come they save all the typos for YOUR column?

Hello Martha K: It is done by a bunch of rancorous old drunks in smelly stockings who hit me over the head with empty wine bottles of white California wine at the conclusion of their staff meetings. The reason is pure old American jealousy because I write so well, plus the fact that I ball everything female (or anything that looks female) which wanders within arm's (?) reach.

Dear Mr. B: I don't believe that a great poet like you works in a post office.

Hello Tilla A: A great poet works at a typewriter. I have more trouble with supervisors than with editors.

Dear Mr. B: I read your article about horseracing. If you know so much about the horses, why ain't you rich?

Hello Karl L: I can't read your handwriting. I had trouble that way once. (I mean a shaky hand.) I was born left-handed and my parents bent my slop spoon so if I put it to my jaw with my left hand all I got was this frustration thing and a slap across the mouth for failing. Besides, riches ain't everything—especially after you've gotten away from parents like that.

Dear Mr. B: How cum they give a column to a prick like you and leave a talented guy like me holding a bag of shit?

Hello Marty E: I keep thinking the same thing. X-factor vs. Y-factor. You take Beethoven. In his time he was not even the most highly-regarded musician. You just can't tell. So keep holding that bag of shit. I have more fan letters to answer.

Dear Mr. B: I am worried about the Hippy invasion of Los Angeles this summer. I am a widow of 39. Suppose 6 young men arrive at my door, covered with hair and spouting Dylan Thomas?

Dear Mrs. Clark J: If you're worried about crabs, always keep a little blue ointment on hand.

Dear Mr. B: I read your column on suicide. That photo of the man hanging from the home-made noose in the attic: is he dead or is it you posing? And why are the creases in his pants so neat?

Hello Mary W: The man is dead. I don't look that good. And he doesn't know why the creases in his pants are so neat.

End of letters . . .

Getting more serious, it is wondrous how much a man can suffer and endure, and I guess there will never be an end to that Bitch, Pain. The simple problem of staying alive in a society of no sense or heart—the totality of hardness everywhere. Most of us live on the edge of starvation and insecurity all of our lives. The mind and the spirit should go mad with sorrow—they sometimes do. They've built a house filled with half-men and the half-men control us. If the devil ran for mayor of Los Angeles, he'd win by a landslide.

To be casual in the midst of shitfire, that’s cool but unreal. We need something to go by. What do we have? Hardly a damn thing. The waste of days and lives is the automatic atrocity. One thing that is needed is leadership but it simply hasn’t arrived. We live on luck and guts and that can grow tiring.

Perhaps it is this dark day as I write this, a Sunday, and all around me I can hear the babble of their TV sets. It is a kind of sound vibration that intermixes in the air, a jibber-ish. The average man stuffs himself with junk and garbage during his leisure. He doesn’t have a chance to recover from his job. He is slugged with ready-made commercial contrivances until he becomes another faceless and unfeeling creature—just another of those many you pass on the streets continually.

I’ll be glad when the sun comes up, won’t you? What a dark stinking day. Like being locked inside a sardine tin. I wish I could make you laugh. Nothing to go by. The police patrolling the dead street. The dirty old man drops a pale blue tear. They ought to make a button for me to wear: AGONY. Then maybe I could laugh.

1.

I missed last week's column because I am a lush, and I looked around and bottles were everywhere and the deadline was past. I live in a rather modern apartment on Oxford Avenue, it's all very quiet, and I sneak my bottles down the stairway, play my radio at low key, and I bathe, modestly, under the arms. The problem with being a drunk is that one usually knows other drunks. One group will arrive one night, another the next. The conversation at these gatherings is hardly noteworthy—it hinges mostly upon gossip, bitching, lying and exaggeration. And when I run these people out on the street after being sickened by their petty musings, they then consider me anti-social (which I am), fat-headed (which I am) and over the hill (which I am not).

Any person into living and creativity must discourage a certain number of visitors, if not most of them. It can be done as Jeffers did by building a fortress of rocks and sending an old aunt to the door to gather messages. I simply tell people *why*. For instance, yesterday I got a phone call: "Are you Charles Bukowski?" "Yes?" "Charles Bukowski, the poet?" "I am *sometimes* Charles Bukowski, the poet." "Well, I'm a young man from New York just got into town, and I've always *loved* your work. I'd like to come by and talk to you." "Kid, just what does *talk* have to do with *poetry*?"

"I don't understand." "I'm not your corner priest. We have nothing to talk about, don't you understand?" I said good-bye and hung up. He'll find another poet, the phone book is full of them.

2.

I’ve been informed by the Department of Water and Power that I’ve been allowed 184 units per billing. That’s not very much. I have a friend who is allowed 1600 units and we both think alike and eat about alike and live about alike. I don’t know why the DWP didn’t shut me off entirely. What am I going to do with 184 units? I’ll have to boil my weenies and then take them out and used the soiled water for my coffee. Maybe this *is* the way to do it. If they want a 10 percent reduction, just cut off one person in 10 and let the others go on living. Greece and Rome knew how to do this. There are really only two types of people in this world: the noble and the fucked.

I notice the DWP reasoning upon allotments is that they are based upon a percentage reduction of past usage at the same residence over a given period. So a blind woman with a parrot lived here before me and her hobby was braille. Now I’m supposed to wear her pantaloons.

Actually, the way it works is that people who *have* been wasting energy are given larger allotments to waste than those who have not. They are rewarding the wasters with more waste.

I think a more stable measurement should be used, to wit so many units for one person living in a one-bedroom apartment, so many units for so and so many people living in a house of a certain size. In a sense, this would still be giving some tolerance to the wealthy, but it would actually come closer to a general fairness.

Let’s break it down more rationally. The way they have it now it’s like two men each owning a horse and one is allowed to feed his horse five bales of hay a month while the other is allowed 10. If Mayor Bradley wants to come and live at my place under 184 units to test the validity of things, fine, and I’ll come to his place and test the validity of his allotment. And he needn’t throw in his wife . . . I’ve got enough troubles already.

I suppose that when they get into gas rationing it will be another distortion of actuality. Americans have cheated and lied for so long, have become so decayed under this great moral Bob Hope front that I wonder why justice hasn’t arrived and all our streets and boulevards do not have Chinese names. We, babies you and I, have been saved by our atomic stockpiles, not our ingeniousness, our guts, our souls, or our courage.

Gas rationing people will make exorbitant claims upon entirely unnecessary travel needs. Some people will become two people with two cars, some people will become three people with three cars. Some people will find need (seemingly) to travel from San Diego to Washington, D.C. three times a week. Everything will happen. More fucking fuel will become consumed, joggled and wasted and resold than if they just left the damn thing alone. The black market for gas and oil will be there for those who can afford it.

Who could have believed that the Arabs and their near-monopoly on oil could have caused massive layoffs here: 55 m.p.h. speed limits, perpetual daylight saving time, grins upon the faces of rapists, muggers and murderers, fear of running the TV too long . . . and over a 50 percent profit-rise for American oil companies . . . while in the long hot summer ahead a man or a woman will have to think five or six times whether to turn on the air conditioner or whether to sweat and stink.

It seems as if there are no shortages of certain commodities: cigarettes, alcohol, speed, cops, smog, bars, McDonald's hamburger stands, bums on skid row, cancer, hydrogen bombs, Lucille Ball, football games, basketball games, poets, politicians, dishes in the sink, infidelity, clap, sparrows, shit, vomit, bad breath, urine, stopped sinks, traffic lights, lines, garbage, roaches, rats, unreason, opera, hangnails, screaming women, rapists, lost laundry tickets and Bukowski.

It was Saturday, July 20, 1974, hot. I'd put ice cubes into the air cooler. I was on the bed sweating out the beer. It got to be 1 p.m., 1:30. I got up, scratched my hemorrhoids, took a bath and got dressed. It was no use. I was trying to stay away, but it was the last Saturday of the Hollypark meet and weekdays were bad enough but Saturdays at the track were nightmares to the vision and the feelings. I decided to go anyhow.

The sixth race was a match race between the two greatest 3-year-old fillies in America, Miss Musket from the west and Chris Evert from the east. It was billed as The Match Race of the Century, $350,000, winner take all. Each stable was putting up $150,000. Match races are very rare. I had only seen one other: Convenience vs. Typecast in 1972. I drove down to Carl Jr's and had a hamburger, fries and a large coke.

There was another reason for going out there. She was there each Saturday, showing leg. She wore very high-heeled shoes, and when she sat down she pulled her dress back and showed all this leg. She wore long hose, no pantyhose for her, and although she didn't go the garter belt route, she wore garters and was continually standing up, lifting her dress and pulling the hose tight. 1937 all over again and I was hardly the only man affected. Still, it was mainly the match race. I had no column in mind and I could report the affair for the *L.A. Free Press*. It would feel good to be a journalist; one didn't need a mind to be a journalist.

I drove out slowly. After you've seen as many races as I have you can miss a few. Match races come about as often as minor and major wars: Man O' War vs. Sir Barton, 1920. Zev vs. Papyrus, 1923. Seabiscuit vs. Ligaroti, 1938. Aisab vs. Whirlaway, 1942. Armed vs. Assault, 1947. Swaps vs. Nashua, 1955. Convenience vs. Typecast, 1972.

I arrived in time for the fourth race. The crowd was large, hot, and by that time—surly and depressed, walking into each other blindly, pushing dazed and dulled. When you see humanity like that, you know there's not much chance. If you want to find what a person is like inside, take them to a racetrack and watch how they react to defeat.

I walked over to the bench where she always sat, my lady with the long glorious legs. There she was—she had on thick, flat, low-heeled shoes. I turned away in disgust. Well, I still had the Match Race of the Century.

I went the No. 3 horse, Grape Juice, in the fourth, and lost in a three-horse photo. The photos weren't coming my way this meet. Some meets they give you all the photos; others they take them all away. It's usually decided for you in the opening days of any meet. Take your cue from there. Also, when you're going hot you bet heavy and go more often; when you're cold you go less and bet less. Never fight the tide.

In the fifth my preference was Afirmado with Tom Landry a close second. The last-minute action on the tote swung to Tom Landry and I got down on him at 8/5 but Afirmado breezed by him in the stretch at 7/2. It wasn't my meet.

The sixth race was the match race. I really wanted Chris Evert to win because Miss Musket was the western horse and I am a rebel by nature. I like to see the crowd murdered, they deserve it. But I also wanted to bet on the winner. I would have to watch the toteboard and do some thinking. All the boys in the local newspapers were picking Miss Musket—inside post, the great Laffit Pincay as jock, and the higher speed ratings. They each carried 121 pounds. Miss Musket was 3/5 on the morning line and Chris Evert 4/5. The betting began. They both opened at 3/5. Then Miss Musket hit 1/2, then 2/5. At 1/2 or 2/5 I knew Musket had it wrapped but I did want to bet Evert. Musket was Florida-bred and Evert was Kentucky-bred, and the Kentucky-breds are usually horses of greater heart.

The betting windows were empty. The crowd didn't know what to do. A guy leaning up against a girder looked at me and gave me a silly grin: "I wouldn't bet this kind of race, it's stupid." "You're not forced to bet," I answered him. An old woman walked up to me: "How can you bet a race like this?" she asked me. "Lady," I said, "this race is the same as any other race. The track extracts 16 per cent and gives the remainder of the money back to the winning ticket holders. This way it's more obvious to you. In a 12-horse field you don't notice the bite, but it's still there."

With two minutes to go, Musket rose from 1/2 to 3/5. As they were putting them in the gate, Evert dropped from 4/5 to 3/5. Underlays win 75 per cent of the races at any track. I only had one bet: Evert, 20 win. Before the race some children had come by carrying a long banner on poles: "MISS MUSKET CAN'T MISS!" Although Miss Musket was the favorite in money bet to win, Evert had gotten the late action and was the underlay.

Musket on the inside broke out of the gate with a slight lead, but Evert with a lunge quickly had a length and a half. That move right there showed the power. Musket was supposed to have the lick but Evert had outbroken her clearly. Right there, the race was over. Pincay knew that Jorge Velasquez had a hell of a lot of horse under him. Evert took the rail and had two lengths around the first turn, and right there you noticed that Evert's legs were longer, her stride longer, easier. Miss Musket seemed to diminish in size, her strides seemed sloppy and confused.

On the backstretch, halfway down, Miss Musket made her last effort, she pulled out and came almost alongside Evert, only you noticed that Velasquez had the hold and that Pincay was praying, his horse was laboring, giving away its stretch run on the backstretch. Then Velasquez let go his hold and Evert began to draw clear: one and one-half lengths, two lengths, four lengths, eight lengths on the turn . . . it was pure murder. At the top of the stretch Chris Evert had 30 lengths. One-half way down the stretch Evert had 40 lengths and had never seen the whip.

I had never seen such a defeating defeat. No war, no assassination, no treachery of love could match it. Pincay eased his horse. Evert breezed across the finish line 50 lengths in front and had so much run left in her Jorge had trouble keeping her from going down to the curve and going the distance once more. The Californians booed their Miss Musket and their Laffit Pincay as they finally crossed the finish line in a gentle canter. Shit, Pincay wanted to win, he'd just been on the wrong horse. The rider's share of the purse was 10 per cent, or $35,000. Pincay felt much worse than the $2 bettors.

Evert paid $3.50, which means $34 for $20, or $14 profit. As I came from the collection window, she was waiting. I had seen her at the track for several meets but we had never spoken. She looked frightened, her eyes were a pale blue, a very pale blue. She put her body right in front of me. I had to stop. "You won, didn't you?" she asked. "Yeh," I said and then stepped around her. Her and her flat white shoes. With high heels I might have taken her over to the bar for a drink, and then all things flowing, I would have taken her home and eaten her pussy. Her and her flat heels.

I didn't watch the other races. I had to go home and write about the match race for the *Free Press*. There was never anything about horse racing in the *Free Press*. I found my car in the parking lot and drove slowly back. I knew that that race would go down in history, something to be talked about for a long time—like the Tunney-Dempsey fights, the Dempsey-Firpo fight, the Zale-Graziano fights, the Dempsey-Willard, the battle of Stalingrad, Burton vs. Taylor, but I was glad I had seen it with my own eyes because things have a way of getting turned sometimes, they are not gotten down like they should be gotten down, something enters afterwards that destroys or distorts.

I got home, sat down to the typer and began my journalistic account of the two 3-year-old fillies. The phone rang.

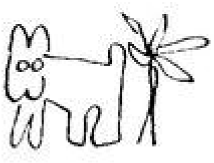
"Hello," I answered.

"Hello," she said. "I was just thinking about you."

“Oh, yes, how you doing?” I asked.

Women have this trick of not saying who they are and they disguise their voices. I got trapped the other night. This one voice sounded like the other and I said, “Oh, did you get your car out of the garage?” And she answered, “Yes, but my oil pan is still dripping all over my pussy.” Then I recognized the voice and I said “Oh, I’m sorry. I thought you were . . .” “Who?” she asked. “Oh . . . a friend.” So this time I was careful. “I’m doing fine,” she said. “I was thinking of you too,” I said. The conversation went on and then I said something and she laughed and I recognized the laugh. “Say, that was one hell of an afternoon,” I said, “you’ve got a great piano.” “And I didn’t know you could play the drums,” she said. “Yeh,” I said. “And you dance, you dance like you’re wearing a hoola-hoop.” “Yeh,” I said. “Well, I’m just sitting here,” she said, “and I’m alone and I just wrote a poem and I look out the window and I see all the lovers walking arm in arm and I thought of you and I thought, well, he’s probably alone and writing a poem too.” “No, I’m writing about a match race.” “What’s that?” “Two matches race.” “Oh?” “Marion, phone me when you’re in town. I’ve got to get this thing down.” “All right,” she said and hung up. She’ll phone again.

Now, you see, this is the way you write about a match race, future students of journalism take note. And when you answer a telephone, feel your way along. Don’t just presume that the last female you were with is the one who is phoning you now. Learn to eat pussy, take your vitamins, especially E, and when in doubt go for the long-legged filly, Kentucky-bred, wearing the tallest cleats possible.



If you think being a matchmaker is easy you’re wrong. I average 14 hours a day in that office on a straight salary. It’s mostly telephone calls and checking all the fight results, trying to get a couple of good boys in together at the lowest cost possible.

And the heavyweights are the biggest ache of them all. And they make the worst fights. They can’t move and they don’t have any guts. Just give them a fair tag and they quit.

Heavyweight fights are almost always dull and most of them leave a pretty good stink after it's over, but the fans still demand them. And that's what makes it hard. There aren't eight good heavies in the U.S. In fact, there aren't 30 heavies fighting in the U.S. And those that are only get a fight every year or two.

Here I was trying to find an opponent for Young Sharkey. 12-1-1, 12 k.o.'s. I finally go to Manilla and get Big Baby Herodima. Herodima is 4-6-2 but he weighs 276 pounds and I figure it will be a lot of fun to hear him fall. I phone the papers and tell them it's a match, write it up. Sharkey and Herodima, coming up in two weeks. I'm finally caught up on my matches. I lean back and feel peaceful for the first time in some days. The phone rings. It's Gerda. She's drunk.

"Listen, Gerda, I've asked you not to call me at work."

"Listen, Shithead, you *owe* me something."

"I don't owe you a damned thing. I've told you it's over between you and me. I've had it."

"Who is it? Suzy? Are you back with Suzy?"

"No, I've dumped her too."

"Listen, Doug, you just can't go around dumping women like that at *your* age. Pretty soon there won't be any left."

"When that happens it will be the happiest day of my life." I hung up. The phone rang again.

"Listen, Shithead, I'm not through talking to you. You're the biggest fraud of the ages. It's Suzy, isn't it? You're back with her again, you *always* go back to her."

"Not this time. She's been screwing everything that walks. It's like sticking your cock in a garbage disposal unit."

"Listen, Shithead, I want to tell you about my goldfish . . ." I hung up. The phone started to ring. I put on my coat, locked the door and got out of there . . .

When I got home I had a beer and a sandwich, showered and went to bed. I was just about asleep when the phone rang.

"Listen, Shithead—"

"Gerda, please. I've told you it's over, don't you understand? For Christ's sake, leave me alone!"

"I can *hear* her breathing!"

"What?"

"I can hear her *breathing*! You've got some woman in bed with you eating cheese crackers and olives! She's got her hand around your balls! I can hear her breathing!"

"You're crazy, that's what's wrong with you, you're completely crazy."

"Put her on the phone. I want to talk to her."

I hung up. The phone rang again. I picked it up, hung up, then lifted the receiver and let it hang from the wire. I went to sleep . . .

At the office the next day I got a call from the Commission saying that Herodima wouldn't be allowed to fight Young Sharkey, because he couldn't see out of one eye. I suggested that maybe a guy who weighed 276 pounds only deserved one eye, but they still said no. So there I was. I had to make the top card over again. I got on the phone. I tried to get Hymie Stringer out of Philly but his manager told me Hymie broke his leg when he fell out of a tree trying to untangle a kite for some neighborhood kid. I tried Mexicali. I tried Canada. Nothing. The phone rang.

"Listen, Shithead, I want to tell you about my goldfish. I got up early this morning and went out to the garden. It was about 6:30 and there was this light fog. And there they were floating near the top, mystified by this shroud of leaves that had fallen over them. I thought you'd like to hear."

"Yes, that's a nice story. Thanks."

"Listen, Shithead, was it good, was it *good* last night?"

"Gerda, I'm trying to line up a card. Herodima can only see out of one eye. Stringer fell out of a tree and broke his leg."

"Did you eat her box? Did you give her the treatment? Did she like it?"

I hung up and went outside and walked around the block twice. When I got back I had some luck. I got Frankie Tanada out of New York. Frankie's 2-14-3 but he's been knocked out by the best, been kayoed by 4 former champions. A little class there. I had some trouble with his manager but we finally settled on $1,250.00. I phoned the papers and told them the bout was on. Young Sharkey and Frankie Tanada. The phone rang.

"Listen, Shithead, I've got too many goldfish, there's not enough oxygen. Can I bring you some of my goldfish?"

"No, I'd rather you didn't."

"Do you still have that woman at your place?"

"What woman?"

“The one I heard breathing. I hope she cleans the ring out of your bathtub like I did. I hope she gets the shit stains out of your crapper like I did. I hope she bites off the end of your cock!” . . .

Tanada got out the next day and began working out right away. I went down and watched him. He didn’t look too bad. I figured he could last 3 or 4 rounds with Young Sharkey. That’s all I could hope for.

On Wednesday I got a call from the gym. Frankie Tanada had broken his hand trying to get a coke bottle out of the vending machine. I got on the phone again. Nothing out of Trenton. Nothing from Texas. The phone rang.

“Listen, Shithead, are you fucking my sister?”

“No.”

“Listen, I’m funny, you can fuck anybody you want but I don’t want you fucking my sister. I won’t *tolerate* that!”

“All right, Gerda.”

“I’ve got this thing about sisters. I don’t even want you phoning her. Have you been phoning her?”

“No.”

“Well, *don’t*,” she said, and hung up.

I finally got Gorilla Gibson out of Detroit. Same price: $1, 250.00. Gorilla was 3-11-2 and had been kayoed by 2 former champions. I phoned the papers and told them about the new match . . .

The fight really went off. I was there. When the bell rang Gibson turned and crossed himself in his corner, then scowled and came toward the center of the ring. He looked good. Young Sharky met him in ring center and hit him with a medium left cross to the body. Gibson dropped, stretched on his back and took the ten count. When he got up and walked back to his corner he still looked good. The fans booed and started throwing things into the ring, everything but money. I got up and walked out looking down at my shoes.

The Commission held up Gibson’s purse. There would be a hearing. Two things appeared wrong, they told me. Gibson had done a tank job and also he was 37 years old. You couldn’t fight in the state after 36 unless you got special permission. That was the next day when I heard. Also Carol came to see me. Carol owned the club, she’d run it for 30 years and kept it going when all the other clubs had their bad years. I’d been with her 18 years.

“Doug,” she said, sitting down across from my desk, “another stinker like that and I’ve got to let you go, I’ve got to get another boy.”

“Listen, it’s those heavies, those heavies always stink. We can get one good heavy in the ring but we can’t get two, you just don’t have that kind of money.”

“You get out of the gate.”

“Impossible.”

“Jenners does it across town.”

“Jenners got the Palace. He can scale the prices. This place is 100 years old, Carol. Why, there are only two restrooms in the whole auditorium. You ought to see the men’s room. Urine seeps one inch across the floor. 14 guys in line behind each urinal. I don’t know what goes on in the ladies’ room. They’ve got to squat. It must be hell. There’s no way we can scale 100-75 and 50 and get away with it and you know that as well as I do.”

The phone rang.

“Listen, Shithead, you’ve got a woman in your office. I can hear her breathing.”

“I’ll call you back, Harry, I’m in conference.”

“I can hear her breathing! Are you going to eat her box?”

“No, Harry, that’s impossible. I’ll call you back. We might give you $500 for a semi. That’s tops.”

“Shithead, you’re so tight, you’ve never ever given me *anything*! And what’s a semi? Who wants half a fuck? I’m going to bring you my goldfish.”

“You do and I’ll run your ass out of the state!”

I hung up then took the phone off the receiver. Carol looked at me. “That was a woman on the phone, wasn’t it?”

“What?”

“I could hear her voice, Doug. I want you to keep your sex life out of the office. And no more stinkers like that last one. The market just dropped below 700. Each month some new country discovers an atom bomb. It’s a new world. Nobody is allowed any more mistakes.”

With that she walked out.

Next week I’ve got a kid from Japan. They never make a bad fight; most of them can’t hit but they make it up with guts. And I’ve got this 17 year old Mexican kid, he’s run off 6 straight and the girls haven’t gotten to him yet.

And neither of these guys weighs over 128 pounds. I feel fairly safe. I should have married Carol, though, ten years ago when we were making it.

Sally and I argued almost every time we got drunk, and the arguments were vile and violent, and we drank almost all the time, and the arguments were LOUD and destructive, and we were evicted from place after place. We'd walk down the street and say, "We lived there. And we lived in that place too. Remember when we lived in that place?" Most of the evictions were via a notice under the door; they didn't care to contact us personally. Sometimes though, we were confronted personally but usually a day or two after our argument. Once I had mounted Sally and as we were working away I heard a key in the door. It opened and there was the manager. He pointed a finger down at Sally: "YOU'RE OUT!" he said. Then he paused and looked at me: "AND YOU'RE OUT TOO!" Then he walked out, closed the door, and we continued.

We began in most new places with a bit of dignity. Sally would tell the manager about me: "He is a fireman." Or, "He's a surgeon's assistant." Or, "He's on vacation." That was the one Sally used the most. In one place a young couple seemed to take a liking to us. They promised us all new rugs. And while we were at the bar one day they had put them in. New rugs. All red, bright red. Quite appropriate, I thought. Two days later while we were asleep there was a POUNDING on the door. "YOU PEOPLE GET OUT OF HERE AND GET OUT OF HERE NOW! YOU'RE DRIVING AL THE TENANTS IN THIS BUILDING CRAZY! I'M GOING TO LOSE MY JOB!" I got up in my shorts and opened the door. "Listen, man, we've got almost a month left on the rent. No chance of us clearing out now." "I'LL PAY YOUR BACK RENT! JUST GET OUT! CHRIST, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO THE RUGS? LOOK AT THAT LAMP! YOU PEOPLE NEED A BOXING RING, NOT AN APARTMENT!" We moved out.

The place we lasted longest was the HALCYON ARMS on Union Avenue, a few places up from the TEAMSTER'S UNION headquarters. They had a desk in front and you had to get your key and leave your key when you went in and out. The guy at the desk we named Sleepless because he seemed to be at that desk 24 hours. When he slept was the mystery, and it might have helped the situation. He was too sleepy to care.

The time I'm thinking about here as I write this was this certain time that Sally left. Sally was always leaving me but this time, somehow, it seemed more definite. It was confusing to me because I didn't know whether to be sad or happy. One likes to pinpoint the emotions or else all seems wasted.

I sat there with my fifth of Scotch and my beer and looked out the window. Sally was out there somewhere. The note had been very definite: BASTARD I CAN'T STAND YOU ANY MORE BUT I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT I LOVE YOU AND THAT I'LL NEVER FORGET YOU EVER . . . SALLY

She hadn't done the dishes or made the bed, had taken all the cigarettes. I walked to the closet. Most of her clothes were still there. I sat down and had another drink. Under the bed I could see one of her pink slippers and next to the slipper was a pair of shit-stained panties. I got up and walked around. There were hairpins everywhere, in the ashtrays, on the dresser, on the floor, in the bathroom. Her magazines were on the floor, by the bed, magazines with exotic covers: MAN RAPES GIRL, THEN THROWS HER BODY FROM 400 FOOT CLIFF . . . 12-YEAR-OLD BOY RAPES WOMAN AT THE ZOO . . . LOVE BANDIT DRINKS THE BLOOD OF HIS VICTIMS. Inside were pictures of beheaded women, of people baked in ovens, of cops digging into murderers' graves outside Bakersfield.

In the dresser next to the Kleenex were all the notes and letters I had ever written her, all neatly bound with 3 or 4 sets of rubber bands. And then there were the photos, all the photos. There was one of both of us crouched on the hood of our '58 Plymouth, Sally showing a lot of leg and grinning like a Kansas City gun moll from out of the twenties and me showing the bottoms of my shoes with the circular waving holes in them. And there were photos of dogs, all of them ours, and photos of children, most of them hers.

Then the phone rang. It was Sally in some bar. I could hear the juke box. "I just want you to know, you son of a bitch, that I'm not coming back." Then I heard a man's voice: "Sally, Sally, forget the fuckin' phone and come back and sit down with us!" "You see," she said, "there are other men in the world beside you." "Your opinion only," I said. "I could have loved you forever," she said. "Get fucked," I said and hung up.

I poured another drink and while looking for a scissors in the bathroom to trim the hair around my ears and in my nose I found a brassiere in one of the drawers and held it to the light. The brassiere looked all right from the outside but inside was this stain of sweat and dirt and the stain was darkened, melded in there as if no washing would ever take it out. I drank my drink and then began to trim the hair around my ears. I decided that I was quite a handsome man and I'd lift weights, go on a diet and get a tan. I deserved better than Sally.

The phone rang again. I lifted the receiver, hung up, lifted the receiver again and let the phone dangle by the cord. I trimmed my ears, nose, eyebrows, drank another hour or two and then went to bed and slept.

I was awakened by a sound I had never quite heard before. It was loud, deep and persistent. It was like a thousand wasps burning to death. It came from the dangling telephone, still off the hook. I picked it up. "Hello."

"Sir, this is the desk clerk. Your phone is off the hook."

"All right. Sorry, I'll hang it up."

"Don't hang up, sir. Your wife is on the elevator."

"Who?"

"She says she's Mrs. Borowsky."

"All right. It's possible."

"Sir, can you get her *off* the elevator? She doesn't understand the controls . . . her language is abusive toward us but she says that you'll help her . . . and sir . . ."

"Yes?"

"We didn't want to call the police."

"Good."

"She's laying down on the floor of the elevator, sir, and, and . . . she has . . . urinated upon herself."

"O.K." I said and hung up.

I walked down the hall in my shorts, drink in hand, cigar in mouth, and pressed the elevator button. Up it came from the bottom floor, one, two, three, four. The doors opened and there was Sally . . . and little delicate trickles and ripples of water lines drifting about the elevator floor and some blotchy pools.

I finished my drink, picked her up and carried her out of the elevator, threw her on the bed and pulled off her wetted panties, skirt and stockings.

Then I put a drink on the coffeetable near her, sat on the couch and had a drink for myself. Suddenly she sat straight up and looked around. “Borowsky”? she asked. “Over here,” I waved my hand. “Oh, thank God.”

Then she saw the drink and drank it right down. I got up, refilled Sally’s glass, put cigarettes, ashtray and matches nearby.

“Who took my panties off?”

“Me.”

“Don’t you go playing with my panties. I’m mad at you.”

“You pissed yourself.”

“Who?”

“You.”

She sat straight upright. “Borowsky, you queer, you dance like a queer, you dance like a woman.”

“I’ll break your goddamned nose!”

“You broke my arm, Borowsky, don’t you go breaking my nose . . .”

She put her head back on the pillow. “I love you, Borowsky, I really do . . .”

Then she started snoring. I drank another hour or two, then I got into bed with her. I didn’t want to touch her at first. She needed a bath, at least. I got one leg up against hers; it didn’t seem too bad. I tried the other legs. I remembered all the good days and good nights and I slipped one arm under her neck, then I had the other around her belly and my drunken penis gently up against her crotch. Her hair came back and climbed into my nostrils. I felt her inhale heavily, then exhale. We would sleep like that most of the night and into the next afternoon. Then I would get up and go to the bathroom and vomit and then she would have her turn.

I figured 500-plus air might make this community college outside Detroit worth my soul so I got on *American* and worked the stewardesses for extra drinks. I was to land a day early, and I made it down the ramp waiting for some professor to grab me and one did and I told him, “I’m yours now. How can you tell what you’ve got until it gets off the plane?”

"We can't. My job's more or less on the line each time but it's worth it." Each year he went out and got one. It had been Ginsberg, Stephen Spender and James Dickey in the last three years and he still had his job. I warned him that I had been thrown out of the women's dorm at the University of Kansas after a reading and we walked toward his car. He drove me to a hotel in Detroit and left me with a mass of phone numbers and instructions. The university was getting the room and board, he assured me. After he left I took a shower and phoned down for drinks.

I had been drinking an hour or so—picking out my poems—when the phone rang. It was my buddy Slim de Bouffe who came in at 5 feet and 265 pounds and played with poems and booze and women. He liked my shit. When he knocked on the door the room knocked back. He wrote poems with a hammer. I told him to come on in.

There wasn't much to the night, mostly drinking, and stories about bad luck with women and good luck with women; about the poetry hustle and the poetry grind and about some of the good people in it and some of the other kind. Slim had a way of dropping little wisdoms out of his mouth as if they didn't count, as if he were asking for a match or giving directions to the nearest whorehouse. You had to listen carefully to Slim but it was worth it. It was worth some hours of listening. He left late that night and I went to bed and slept in that 100-year-old hotel in the middle of Murder City and I slept well.

Awakening was another matter. I was on the fourth floor and the windows looked out on a building with a flagpole on top of it. I gagged, went to the bathroom, had a minor vomit, opened a warm beer and got the switchboard woman.

"Yes sir?"

"I have a complaint."

"Yes sir?"

"Look, I'm going to be here 2 or 3 nights which means that I'm going to wake up with 2 or 3 hangovers."

"You'd better send your complaint to God, sir."

"All right, connect me."

"He's unlisted."

"Don't I know. Look, as I was saying, I'm going to wake up here every morning and you know the first sight that will meet my eyes?"

"No, I don't, sir."

"The American flag."

"The American flag?"

"Absolutely."

"You mean you don't like the American flag, sir?"

"Of course not. It has these red and white stripes, they wave in the wind, and then there are the stars, there are all these stars up in the corner, you know, on top of the blue . . . I wake up sick. I've got to read poetry at the university, they're going to put me on video tape."

"Sir, I *like* the American flag!"

"Fine, I'll take your room and you take mine."

"Have you fought in any wars, sir?"

"Yes, first I fought for Franco in Spain and then . . ."

She hung up on me.

It was hot under the video lights but I worked from a bottle of 100 proof vodka and, when that emptied out, Slim de Bouffe went out into the night and came back with a six-pack. I finished it up under that and the applause seemed fair enough. I fielded some easy questions, got the 500 dollar check and got out. They told me they'd mail the air within ten days. I had to work a bookstore-signing for 50 bucks. Then a night's sleep and back to L.A. where I had figured this new system on the harness races. The sophisticates always sneered when I talked about the races. The sophisticates always thought soul could be found in the obvious places; that's why they were sophisticates instead of artists.

There were 600 people in the bookstore. The owner had advertised in the main Detroit newspaper. We couldn't move. Drinks and food had to be passed hand-to-hand overhead. I drank everything they handed me except wine. I signed books and screamed back insult for insult. I was high up in the sky. I beat their meanness with a more clever meanness. Civilization. They wanted to suck me dry and trash me. I'd come up through the alleys like Jersey Joe and old Jimmy Braddock. They couldn't trap me with love. Adulation, maybe. I read a couple of poems from *Burning* that somebody shoved at me. Then I fought my way out, cursing that whole gang of bloodsuckers. I got to the curbing and a car pulled up. "In here, Bukowski!" I jumped in and we drove off.

“You’re just like a rock star, baby,” said the kid at the wheel. I looked around: a car full of female groupies.

“Like hell. Either these women get out or I get out. All I want is a ride to the hotel.”

The kid at the wheel pulled over to the curbing. “All right, girls, get it out. Now!”

They got out and we got some dock-hand, back-room cussing from those lovelies and then the kid put it to the floor and we went down the street.

“Eddie Mahler,” he said.

“I’m Charles Bukowski,” I answered.

The kid, Eddie, he was good. The street was very dark as all Detroit streets seemed to be. Eddie had a little game. He’d see a car up ahead and come alongside. Then he’d smash his car into the side of the other car. He’d bounce it good. Then he’d come back and hit it again and again. He’d keep hitting that car until it climbed up over the curbing and stopped. Then Eddie would stop the car and glare at them and I’d sit there and glare at them right along with Eddie. Then we’d drive off and find another car and do the same thing. We got 4 or 5 cars that way.

“You’re a vicious son of a bitch, Eddie. I like you.”

“You and Rod McKuen are my favorite poets.”

“What?”

“Yes, you two guys are the only poets I can stand.”

I let that go. Soon we seemed to be driving along in the country. There were trees and space everywhere. Eddie stopped the car. “Get out,” he said.

I got out.

“O.K,” he said, “I want that 500 dollar check. You’re going to sign it over to me, Edward Mahler.”

“And you’re going to suck your mother’s left tit.”

The first punch came so fast I couldn’t see it. I swung from the heels and missed his head by two feet. He sunk one into my gut and I dropped to my knees and vomited up ten dollars worth of booze. I got back up.

“What did you say that name was?”

“Eddie Mahler.”

“Got a pen, Eddie? I lost mine giving out all those autographs.”

“Sure.”

I walked over to his car and put the check on top of the car roof. It was very wet in the moonlight. I signed the check over to Eddie, handed him the check and the pen and we got back into the car. “The least you can do, punk, is to drive me back to the hotel.”

“Don’t call me a punk.”

“Drive me back to the hotel, punk.”

He started the car, and we drove off. “I want you to meet my mother first. She’s always admired your stuff.”

“All right.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Compared to what’s happened, that’s easy.”

“Sure.”

“Eddie, if this ever gets out, I’m finished. I’m supposed to be the tough guy, the man of the streets. Hell, if this gets out nobody will ever buy my books.”

“I don’t want to compound anything. I’ll keep quiet.”

“I’m not speaking of morals or ethics or anything, Eddie, but that money’s really mine. And . . . hey, shit, what happened to my wristwatch?”

I looked over and Eddie had on two wristwatches. “Give me my wristwatch, punk.”

Eddie slipped my watch off. I put it back on. “One time I’m on the floor drunk, passed-out and I feel somebody lift my wristwatch, then I feel somebody pulling at my finger, he’s trying to get my ring off. I look up and he’s got out this knife, he’s going to peel down my finger to get my ring and it’s not worth $3. You ought to have heard me holler. He scattered.”

“I’ll pay you back $100 a month from this check I took from you,” said Eddie.

“No good,” I said, “you’re driving me back to the hotel. Then we’re going to sleep it off and I’m going to duke it out with you again when I’m sober.”

“O.K, but first I want you to meet my mother.”

Eddie’s mother was very nice. A young blonde. I mean young compared to me. Neither Eddie or I mentioned anything about the check. His mother mixed us all some drinks and we drank an hour or two, then left. Before we left Eddie went to the closet and gave me one of his shirts, a nice purple and white striped job. I put it on, mine had somehow gotten bloodied and ripped during the fight. Before we left, Eddie’s mother got out these photos of her ex-husband, a rather famous gangster who'd been gunned down by the cops. We all did a bit of mourning and weeping for him, me mostly. Then we had another drink and left.

In the hotel in the morning I awakened first, shit and showered. Eddie was out. My first thought was to sneak downstairs and holler cops. But somehow that was out. I got back into bed and opened a warm beer. No refrigeration in the fucking place. Eddie rolled over. "Hey," he said.

"Yeah?"

Eddie got up, went to his pants and took out his wallet. He walked over and handed me the check. "I knew I could never take this. I knew I'd give it back when I woke up in the morning."

"Eddie, I'll take it."

The kid started getting dressed. "Care for a warm beer?"

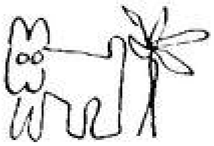
"O.K."

I broke one open for him. Eddie finished dressing, then finished the beer. I found a pen and wrote my address down. "Write me, Eddie."

He took the slip of paper, put it in his pocket and walked out the door. That's about all there was to that reading except I met Slim de Bouffe and his girlfriend in this bar later, they were going to get me to the airport and I told them the story as we drank green beer in a place they were mopping up with a very strong disinfectant and we almost vomited together. "You mean you couldn't take him?" asked de Bouffe.

"I couldn't take him," I answered.

Then we all got up and walked over to a sweeter-smelling place.



They were both 7 years old and they found the hole in the fence and crawled through.

"He usually sits out in the yard in this chair. He just sits there looking kind of mad."

"He might kill us, Billy."

"Look, Red, he's in enough trouble, he won't kill us."

"You say he looks mad."

"He's just pissed. He don't go to the market or eat out or anything. He sends people out for his things. We got to look out for his people."

"I'll bet he has guards everywhere."

"Not too many, Red, just two or three. I come here every day. I never been caught yet."

"You like to look at him, Billy?"

"Yeah. Only today I think I want to talk to him."

"Talk to him?"

"Yeah. Now keep down low against those bushes. Now lay down here."

"O.K."

"See him, Red? He's sitting in that big chair with his cane, he's just looking off into space, looking mad."

"I see him."

"Let's crawl closer."

"How about the guards?"

"Oh, they just walk around. They get careless. If we had a gun we could kill him right from here."

Billy pointed his finger, moving his thumb down: "Pow!"

"I'm scared, Billy!"

"Me, too. That's the fun of it. Keep crawling closer."

"It's him, Billy, it's him! I've seen him on TV, I've seen his picture in the papers!"

"Sure it's him, Red. Who do you think he is?"

"He does look mad! It's just like seeing God!"

"It's better, we can talk to him."

"You—still going to talk to him?"

"Yeah, yeah, I've made up my mind. Keep crawling toward him."

"I've pissed my pants, Billy."

"It doesn't matter. Keep moving up."

"I pissed my pants, Billy, I'm so scared I pissed my pants."

"I could hit him with a rock now. Red. He's just looking off into space. Soon we'll be able to reach out and touch him."

They crawled closer. Soon they were out of the brush and they crawled along the lawn, closer and closer. They were 12 feet away, then six. Then they stopped. They just remained quiet, breathing.

Finally Billy said, "Hey!"

The man in the chair was jolted upright, dropping his cane. “*Christ!* . . . what is it?”

“We came to talk to you,” said Billy, standing up. Red stood up too, looking down at the spot on the front of his pants.

“Red pissed his pants, we’re sorry about that.”

The man picked up his cane and pointed it at the boys.

“You goddamned kids get out of here!”

“We want to talk to you.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. Now get your asses out of here!”

“My father didn’t vote for you,” said Billy. “He tells people that.”

“Well, the way it worked out, somebody must have.”

“Why did you do it?” asked Billy.

“Do what?”

“Do what you did.”

“You kids live around here?”

“Sure. What do you think?” asked Billy. “You think we flew down from Mars?”

“It wouldn’t surprise my ass in the least.”

“Why do you use dirty language?”

“Sorry.”

“All your men were sentenced to jail. Aren’t you sorry for your men?”

“All men are guilty of something.”

“Do you mean all men should be in jail?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Does your wife still go to bed with you after what you did?”

The man lifted his cane and pointed it at Billy. “You stay out of my sex life!”

“I’ll bet she doesn’t anymore.”

“What do you know about sex?”

“Plenty.”

“O.K., what is it?”

“It’s something to do to make yourself feel good so you can go on and do all the things that don’t make you feel so good.”

“That’s not Webster but it’s not bad.”

Then there was silence. The man turned and looked off into space again. Some minutes passed. Then Red said, “I kind of like you, anyhow.”

Billy turned to Red: “What the hell’s wrong with you? He’s no good. He ought to be in jail with the rest of those guys!”

“I guess you’re right.”

“I guess, Red,” said the man, “the least you can do for me is vote Republican when you grow up.”

“Herbert Hoover was a Republican and he let the people starve to death!” said Billy.

“How do you know that?” asked the man.

“My uncle told me.”

“O.K., that’s good enough.”

“Both those Kennedys were good guys and look what happened to them.”

“I’ve heard.”

“Somebody ought to kill you!”

“So my wife can go to bed with another man?”

“No. Just because you STINK!”

“Boys, I think this interview is over.”

Billy and Red stood there looking at him. A solitary bird flew past between them, quickly, looping up and down like a fantasy and then it was gone. The man leaned upward in his chair. Then he screamed out: “HARRY! DOUG! OVER HERE!” quickly but heavily. They were young and well dressed and had revolvers drawn. They were each adorned with the latest hairdo and the latest clothing style.

“WHERE THE HELL’S MY SECURITY? WHAT YOU GUYS BEEN DOING, PLAYING SCRABBLE IN THE ROSE BOWER OR WORSE?”

“How’d these fucking kids get in here?” asked the taller of the security guards.

“Ask them,” said the man.

“How’d you kids get in here?”

“A hole in the fence.”

“But everything’s wired!”

“What’s wired?”

“Oh, shit, we got to check the wiring,” said the taller of the security men to the shorter, “get your ass on Mr. Bell now and get Del Monico over here, and FAST!”

“Listen,” said Billy, “I think we’ll be going home now.”

“Hold it now!” said the remaining security man, “don’t move!”

“Let them go.”

“Don’t you want me to process them?”

“What the hell you going to find? You’ll find that one of the kids has pissed his pants and the other has a father who is a plumber and gets drunk every Saturday night.”

“All right, kids,” said the security guard, “you can go now.”

Billy turned and began to run and then Red ran after him. Red was a better runner than Billy and he passed him and got through the hole in the fence first.

“Anything I can do for you?” the security guard asked the man.

“Yeah. Get the hell out of my sight, Now!”

It was done and the man in the chair leaned back again. You could hear the ocean if you really listened. He really listened. He still held the cane in his right hand. The veins of that hand were not relaxed.

Harry walked into the bar and sat down. “Scotch and water,” he told the bar-keep. Harry had some thoughts on bars. They were infested with the second-lowest breed of humanity. The racetrack’s got the first lowest breed of humanity. Having just gotten in from the track he was completing a meaningless day. At least the jukebox wasn’t on and nobody was shooting pool. He remembered the days you used to be able to come into a bar and stare into the mirror until you got drunk. Or you beat the shit out of somebody or got the shit beat out of you. And you used to be able to win at the racetrack and occasionally meet a woman of high quality. But why cry? Everyone lived in the same world as you did. Or so they said. He got the first drink down and ordered another.

When he looked up there was a lady in her mid-40s, large purple blouse, sagging breasts, overtight skirt showing pot belly, two heart-shaped blue earrings on long silver chains, and in the center of her face—a blaze of orange lipstick, glistening wet. The earrings fascinated Harry. The lady managed to move her head just enough to keep the earrings bouncing inanely—the blue hearts leaped and jumped and whirled on either side of her head. “Hi! I’m Janice!”

“Harry.”

“You new in town?”

“In the world.”

“*Ta*! Ain’t that somethin’? Can I ask you somethin’?”

“Shoot.”

“Shoot”?

“Speak.”

“Are you a slave or a master?”

“I remain humble among the multitudes: I’m a slave.”

“What’s a slave?”

“A man who can’t reach his own asshole with his dick.”

“You’re bitter.”

“No, I just can’t reach.”

“Do you believe in love?”

“Yes, but only for other people.”

Janice got up and brought her drink down, blue heart earrings jumping like jazz discovering Bach. She had on false eyelashes two and one-half inches long. “I wanna buy you a drink.”

“O.K.”

“You like money?”

“Better than youth, fame or virgins.”

Janice ordered the drinks and said, “You come home with me and you’ve made yourself 50 bucks.”

“Fine. I’ll do anything but drink buttermilk.”

“Oh, good, then we’ll make it 75 bucks.”

They drank up and he followed her out. It was a pink Mercedes. She angled off from the curbing, breaking traffic in half, horns going, the blue hearts jumped . . . She swirled up a half-moon driveway and pulled in front of a large three-story house. The garage door opened like a large, terrifying and mindless mouth but she jumped out of the car, opened Harry’s door and pulled him out.

“Come, my darling, I just can’t wait!”

“I wonder,” he said, “what the third-lowest breed of humanity does?”

He followed her up the stairway and into the house.

Nice, he thought, a guy like Sugar Ray Robinson could use something like this.

He found himself in a large leather chair overhung with a lamp on one side and a parrot on the other. Janice ran into the other room. Then the parrot looked at him and said, “Now eat your *spinach*, darling.”

“Oh,” said Harry to the parrot, “why don’t you go flog yourself off?”

“After you eat your *spinach*, darling!”

“What?”

“Now eat your *spinach*, darling . . . ”

Janice came in with two large drinks, gave him one, then sat on the couch across from him. Harry drained half his drink; his temples damn near gagged and a photograph of *Man of War* coerced before his eyes, then vanished. He drained the other half.

“Keep them coming,” he said.

Janice walked into the other room. Harry stared at the parrot. The parrot stared back. Then the parrot looked away, bored.

She handed him the drink. “What I want you to do, you may not like.”

“For $75 I believe that any man could stand a minor diminishment.”

“Maybe. Drink your second drink first.”

Harry did that. Janice got up and walked out. He waited. Janice walked back in.

She threw the material on his lap. “You put that stuff on.”

Harry picked it up and looked at it. “Great Grandmother of Christ, don’t you know I’m half-crazy already? This could carry me into the shit-stained land of absentia.”

“Seventy-five bucks. Put it on.”

“Yes.”

“The bedroom,” she said, “is one sharp corner to the left.”

Harry carried the stuff into the bedroom: a little boy’s short pants—black—and a blouse, ruffled, silky and white; underwear with designs of rockinghorses, moons and candy canes upon it; two ankle-length stockings, white.

He worked his way into the stuff and walked out. Janice put another drink into his hand as he sat down. He drank it halfway down—no vision of *Man of War* this time.

No vision at all.

"You're a nice boy," she said.

"Now," said the parrot, "eat your *spinach,* darling!"

"What have I got myself into?" asked Harry.

"Seventy-five bucks."

"Did Job have to suffer like this to stay on the payroll?"

"You keep saying clever things! You *are my bright* little boy!"

"Look, why don't we just fuck and get it over with?"

"If you keep saying things like that, Harold, I'm going to have to wash your mouth out with *soap*!"

Janice got up and walked to the telephone, dialed, waited.

"Harriet? Harriet, my boy is back home! Won't you come over and see my boy? You *will*? I'm so happy! We'll be waiting!"

Janice hung up.

"Another drink," said Harry. Janice went to the kitchen and stoked up another, brought it out, handed it to him. "Now Harold, I got a note from your teacher today and she said that you had been *bad* in school, that you had pulled a little girl's pigtail and stuck it in the inkwell! Why did you *do* that, Harold, bad boy!"

"Because she'd been finger-fucking her sister while the other girls were playing volleyball!"

"Harold! I *told* you about dirty words! One more time and you get the soap!"

"Now," said the parrot, "eat your *spinach*, darling!"

The doorbell rang about 10 minutes later and Janice got up and answered it. "Harriet! And I'm so *glad* you've got Timmy with you!"

They walked in and Harriet was an almost carbon copy of Janice. She had some guy with her. He had on little boy's pants—black—and a blouse, ruffled, silky and white; underwear with reindeer and stars interspersed with rockinghorses, and two ankle-length stockings, white.

"Harold," said Janice, "I want you to meet Timmy."

They shook hands. "How you doing, man?" Harry asked.

"All right, I guess. How you doing?"

"Fair to middling."

"Me too."

Timmy sat down in a chair across the way and Janice went in to mix new drinks. "I want you boys to get along now," said Harriet.

“Now,” said the parrot, “eat your *spinach*, darling!”

“This recession is a living hell,” said Timmy to Harry.

Janice brought the drinks back in and handed them out, then sat down. “Harold has been a *very* bad boy! Just this morning we had hard-boiled eggs and he said he didn’t like the yolk and he didn’t like the white. Then he dropped the jam right onto the front of his shirt!”

“You think the Dodgers will repeat this year?” Timmy asked Harry.

“It’s a cinch,” said Harry, “they’re going to learn how to use Ferguson, and Lopes will get off faster at the bat.”

“Timmy has been *very* bad too,” said Harriet. “He left his tricycle out in the rain and all the spokes got rusted. He needs a *spanking* very badly!”

“Harold needs a spanking very badly too. He pulled a little girl’s pigtail and then stuck it in the inkwell!”

“I *told* you . . . she was . . .”

“*Harold*.”

“These boys are acting very *badly*! I think I’d better take mine home!”

“Mine needs some chastising too.”

“All right, Janice, I’ll phone you tomorrow. We’re leaving. Timmy!”

“Christ, at *least* let me finish my drink!”

“No, no, we’re *leaving*. Timmy!”

And she took Timmy and led him out the door by one ear, the clear night wind blew in, and then they were gone.

“Now,” said Harriet, “*you* go to the bedroom!”

Harry walked into the bedroom. It was dark in there. But he did have his drink with him. He finished his drink and rolled the glass across the rug. He unlaced his shoes and stretched out on the bed. It was one of those neighborhoods where you could hear the crickets rubbing their legs together. He listened to the rubbing of the legs. It made things seem fairly all right.

Then he wondered, should I take this stuff off and wait for her or should I let her undress me?

It was the first bit of uncalculated, mathematical wisdom he had come upon in some days of weeks, but he still hoped she’d bring one last good drink.

Harry bought a newspaper and walked into the travel agency. A woman in a yellow skirt, white blouse and high heels was bent over placing something in the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet. Her skirt hiked up and Harry stared at the back of her legs. The legs were good. When the woman turned around Harry elevated his glance. The woman was in her mid-40s but she still radiated sex. She was almost plump and the skirt fit tightly, so tightly that Harry could see the garter belt that held up the stockings.

"Hello," said Harry, "I need a ticket."

"Please sit down," the woman said. All her clothing pulled at her as if she wanted to get out of it. When she sat down she crossed her legs and Harry found himself staring up her legs. She noticed and smiled slightly.

"Where to," she asked.

"Detroit," said Harry, "regular coach fare."

"Round trip?"

"Yes, round trip."

"When do you want to leave?"

"Oh, sometime Thursday afternoon. It doesn't matter much when I arrive. I read Friday night."

"Read?"

"Oh, pardon me, I'm a poet."

"Oh, a poet . . . how strange. Do they pay you to read?"

"$500 plus air this trip."

"What kind of poetry do you write?"

"Sex."

"Sex?"

"Yes, sex."

The woman checked her schedules.

"I can get you on a flight out of L.A. International at 2:48 p.m. *American*."

"Fine."

"Return trip open?"

"Yes."

"You must lead an interesting life."

"It's all right."

"I'm Mrs. LeMon."

"I'm Harry Benson."

While Mrs. LeMon dialed the telephone Harry looked up her legs again. She had recrossed her legs and the skirt had climbed higher. It was hell to be a leg man and come across the rarity of high heels, long stockings and garter belt. All the modern women had gone to pantyhose, which de-sexified everything, or pants. Well, if women didn't want to be sex symbols that was their right, and if they wanted to be that was their right too. Harry forced his eyes from her legs and read the paper.

"Look," said Harry, "here's a Superior Court judge who has authorized castration for two men who pleaded guilty to child molestation."

Mrs. LeMon hung up. "I've got you on flight 248, *American* , 2:48 p.m. What did you say?"

"These two guys have been molesting little girls and they might get their balls cut off."

"I think that's terrible," said Mrs. LeMon.

"Me too," said Harry. "Some girls are terrible little teases and a man gets hot."

"I'd like to read some of your books."

"You wouldn't like them."

"What are they about?"

"Just stories and poems."

"About what?"

"Rape, child molestation, oral sex, garter belt freaks, high-heeled shoe fetishes, whips, leather, all that crap."

"And they *pay* you to read that?"

"Oh, I mix in a little spring and love and death and laughter. It confuses them. Look here, it says that the exiled Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn is visiting Canada. He's got it made. They toady to those kinds of freaks. He'll probably lay five or six Eskimo virgins. He can't write worth a damn."

"Do you like virgins?"

"I like mature women, slightly overweight sex symbols."

"I like your sense of humor."

"I'm serious."

"Cash or credit?"

"Cash. How much is it?"

Mrs. LeMon told Harry how much it was and he put the money down in front of her.

"Mrs. LeMon, I know this making out of the tickets takes some time. I think I'll go out and get a beer and a sandwich."

"Why don't you go out and get your beer and drink it upstairs? My apartment's right up that stairway. There's meat in the refrigerator and some Russian rye. You can make a sandwich, drink your beer and rest while I'm making out the tickets."

"O.K. I'll be right back."

Harry found a liquor store two blocks west. He got a six of Bud in the bottle and put a dime in the parking meter in front of his car as he walked past. When he got back to the travel agency Mrs. LeMon was making out the tickets. Her skirt was hiked higher. He didn't look at her face, he looked at her legs and said, "Hi!"

"Hi!" she answered.

Harry went up the stairway. It's like a movie, he thought. Someday I'll write about this. He opened the door. It was a nice apartment. Female. Real female, old-fashioned female. Harry had once dreamt he had fucked his mother; it had been the wettest wet dream he had ever had. Sex was doing what you weren't supposed to do. That's one reason marriage didn't work; it became a job instead of a raid into the unknown. He was really a puritan and the breaking down of the mores made him horny forever; that along with vitamin E and a late start in the game.

He broke out one bottle of Bud and put the rest in the refrigerator. He had to be the best poet in the game today. Everybody agreed that Bukowski was slipping, Ginsberg was a nice old bore and Creeley was drinking a quart of whiskey a day. Duncan was too precious, Lowell was too careful and Ferlinghetti was hampered by an alcoholic wife.

Harry sucked on the beer and walked over to her dresser. He opened the second drawer down and he was right—there were eight or 10 pairs of panties. He went through them and found a pair he liked: black, netted and laced. He unzipped and pulled it out. He took the panties and folded them over his cock and began rubbing them over his cock. Harry watched himself in the mirror, grinning, and he kept rubbing. His cock began to swell and the head puffed up and out of the panties. He watched himself in the mirror, then his mind said, Jesus I got stop or I'm going to lose it. He zipped up, poking it in and put the panties in one of his rear pockets. He finished the beer, went to the refrigerator and opened another one. He looked in there. Why was it that almost all women ate cottage cheese and yogurt and cheese? Soft stinking cheese. And doughnuts and *See's* candies?

He took the beer and walked over to the couch and sat down. He'd thrown the newspaper down there. He picked it up:

55 FELLED BY FOOD

> Nuevo Laredo, Mexico (AP)—More than 55 persons who attended a Knights of Columbus luncheon at the Lion's Club convention hall were hospitalized with food poisoning, officials reported.

Bastards, thought Harry, serves them right. Anybody who goes to Mexico deserves to be reamed and creamed.

The door opened. It was Mrs. LeMon. "Hi!" she said.

"Hi!" said Harry, "who's running the store?"

"My son, Gary," said Mrs. LeMon, sitting down.

"Is he competent?"

"Oh my, yes."

"Will he come up here?"

"I told you he's competent. I told him not to come up here no matter what happened."

"Suppose I'm some kind of kook."

"You're not. Your face is too kind."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Pull your dress higher. I love your legs."

Mrs. LeMon pulled her dress higher. Harry bent down and kissed one of her knees. Then he spread her legs and bit her hard four or five inches above the knee.

"Oooh, that hurt, don't do that!"

"Go in and piss."

"What?"

"I told you to go in and piss. Women pissing make me hot."

"But I don't want to pee."

Harry put the bottle down and slapped Mrs. LeMon across the face, hard.

"Oh, don't do that . . ."

"I told you what to do! Now go ahead and do it!"

Mrs. LeMon went to the bathroom. Harry finished his beer and brought out two more, opened them, put them on the coffee table. He heard the toilet flush. Mrs. LeMon came out and sat down.

"Drink up and relax," said Harry. "That Vietnam evacuation was really a mess. The whole goddamned army and their wives and their whores trying to scale the walls of the U.S. Embassy. Old people caught in barbwire and bleeding to death and Marines bayoneting anybody the TV cameras weren't on. All to come to America and replace the Puerto Rican as the most despised racial group in America. Suck my dick!"

"I don't *do* that."

"70,000 collaborators swimming in the ocean and begging for mercy! Suck my dick!"

"I told you . . ."

"Well, then, drink your beer and show me more leg!"

Harry drained the remainder of his bottle without stopping. "I saw some wine in there. Can I drink your wine?"

"Sure."

The wine was three-quarters full. Harry stood in the center of the room and took a good hit.

"Stand up!" he told Mrs. LeMon. "You got me hot. You got that ass and those legs. A woman your age doesn't deserve to have that. You got me hot. STAND UP!" I said.

Harry put down the wine bottle and took off his belt. He folded it double and then lifted Mrs. LeMon's dress. He lifted it above her waist, exposing the thighs, the panties, the garter belt, the white skin between the stockings and the panties.

Harry began to beat her alongside the legs, starting low around the ankles and working up, gradually increasing the tempo and the force, then he got to the upper thighs and thrashed, saying, "You whore, you goddamned whore . . ."

Mrs. LeMon tried to hold in her screams so her son, Gary, downstairs, wouldn't hear her. Then he spun her and beat upon her ass viciously. She fell to the floor, weeping. Harry disrobed. He walked over, took a good hit of the wine, then walked up to Mrs. LeMon. She appeared to be shivering. Harry grabbed her by the hair and pulled her upward. She screamed as he did so, loudly.

“Goddamn you, shut up! If your son comes up here I’ll kill both of you!” He kissed Mrs. LeMon, spreading the lips of her mouth open. Her face was wet and she was convulsing. He worked her panties off and got it in, taking both hands and spreading the cheeks of her ass wide, extremely wide. He saw her ass in the mirror and himself bent over her like leprosy. They worked across the room knocking over the coffee table, banging into a wall. Her cunt was too large for him. Too many babies. He had to get her in front of the mirror and watch. He finally came. He threw her on the bed. She seemed to be convulsing. He saw a high-heeled shoe on her rug. He dressed, watching her. Fully dressed he opened his shirt a few buttons and dropped the high-heeled shoe in. Then he heard her voice: “You’re leaving, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m going to Detroit, *American*, flight 248.”

“I love you, Harry.”

“What? That wasn’t love. That was raw sex shit, dementia. I’m not proud of it.”

“I know I’ll never see you again. Kiss me goodbye, that’s all I ask.”

“God, this is grade-B movie.”

“Harry . . .”

“All right!”

He got into bed next to her with his shoes on. Her mouth opened. He closed on it. And held. She was crying, rushes of water coming out from under her eyelids. The high-heel shoe was between them in his shirt and the heel was stabbing into his chest. Harry pulled away. He got up and then noticed the nightstand on the other side of the bed. There was half a pack of cigarettes and a pack of matches. The matches said: “Save-on a GREAT place to shop! The quality drug stores . . .” He took out a cigarette and lit it. *Lighted* it, as the intellectual writers said. Then he noticed a book on the nightstand. He picked it up: Jong’s *Fear of Flying*. Mrs. LeMon seemed still at last. The wine bottle was on the floor on its side. He picked it up and found one last hit. Then he walked out the door and went down the stairway. Gary was down there. He looked bright but introvert, no challenge. “Is Mom all right?” he asked.

“She’s pleased,” Harry told the kid. The kid caught it. He liked the kid’s kool. One thing about the new generation, they either understood very much instinctively or they became murderers without feeling. There was very little middle ground, and maybe they were right because it was the middle ground, that vast jelly-like totality of billions and billions following all central signals, that had kept the world crawling over and over itself again and again, bored, fatted, starving, inane, feeding on nothing, giving nothing, being nothing.

Harry walked toward the door of the travel agency. He got his hand on the knob when Gary spoke: “Mr. Benson?”

“Yes?”

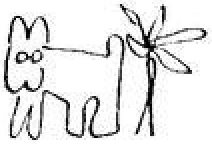
“You forgot your tickets.”

“Oh?”

Harry walked back. The kid handed him the tickets enclosed in a neat blue leather folder. “Thanks for coming to see our agency. I hope you’ll use us again on your next flight.”

Harry took the tickets and walked back out the door. He walked back to his car. There were 12 minutes left on the parking meter. He got back in the car, it started; he took a left on 6th street and a right on Vermont. Traffic was bad and Paul Williams was on the radio. He didn’t like either one of them. It was, perhaps, a matter of utter obviousness. He took out the high-heeled shoe and stuck it up on the dash. Yes, much better.

He’d kill them in Detroit.



I turned the car into The Bug Builders in Santa Monica and began walking. I’d blown an engine down there some months past, had gotten a rebuilt and was in for the 3,000 mile check-up. I lived in L.A. and knew I had hours to wait. It was 10:15 a.m. I found a restaurant open and walked in. There was only one man in there, at a back table. I took a table at about the center and the waitress brought me a menu. Breakfast. I ordered ham and eggs, scrambled. I was hungover but thought I might hold it down. I had a paper and opened it. “Dodgers lose.” That cheered me a tick. When the waitress brought my breakfast she refilled my coffee cup. Fine girl with an ordinary ass. I began eating and then two people entered—a boy of about 23 and a woman of 50. They took the table directly across from mine. “That Helen keeps coming in when I’m looking at television and she *insists* on talking. And she talks in this *LOUD* voice!” said the boy. “I tell you, next time she does that I’m going to turn my television on so *LOUD* she won’t be able to be heard! I’m going to *do* it, so help me!”

When I finished eating I stood up and belched as I left the table.

I walked down to the mall. A cop was giving two kids with bicycles citations. *LEPKE* was playing at the movie but it didn’t open until noon. A girl with very good legs and a miniskirt walked by. She saw me looking at her and turned her head and stared at me as she waited for the signal.

What’s she thinking? I thought. If one only knew what they were thinking.

She crossed the street and I watched her haunches revolve. Then I noticed that she had a wrinkle in her skirt where she had sat down and I lost interest.

I walked down Santa Monica to Ocean, then crossed the street and walked through the park. I turned onto the pier and walked along it. The people on the pier were unconcerned; they were neither happy nor sad. They rattled about in the Penny Arcade and bounced against each other in the electric cars. The fishermen weren’t catching much. I walked down one side, came up the other. Coming up the other I came upon two young girls, each about 16. One was sunbathing on top of a cement bench, head down. The other was underneath the bench with her head sticking out toward the ocean. She had the sexiest lips I had ever seen on a woman, a girl. The appeal of those lips was jolting. One doesn’t expect lips like that from under a stone bench at 11:25 a.m. And between those lips, on the side toward me, stuck out a tiny tip of a tongue.

Never had I seen anything more astonishingly sexual and lush. And her eyes were on mine. The effect was so strong that I had to turn away. When I looked again it was as before. I walked on. What does one do? What is the password, or what hope, when a man is 54 and still feels all those designs and patterns and traps and wonderments? Why didn’t they hurry up and fix my fucking car?

I crossed and walked down the stairway to the boardwalk that led to Venice. I was still badly hungover. Breakfast hadn't helped much. It was hardly down. It hung about halfway up and halfway down. "Drunkenness and suicide are the bedmates of the writer," somebody had almost said once. It was true; I'd never known a good writer who was not either an alcoholic or a doper or both.

"Charles!"

I walked over. It was a man about 28, dark-haired, big. He had on glasses and needed a shave. "You don't know me," he said. "I've read your books."

"I'm sick," I said, "and walking around while they fix my car."

"My car's at Sears. I'm getting a new battery. Can I buy you a drink?"

"Too sick. I never drink before noon."

"I'm sick, too."

"Come on. Let's sit down. I'm wobbly."

We walked over to a bench facing the ocean. "Venice depresses me," I said, "especially when you get down to that Jewish sandwich shop and these hard cases, these Tim Leary dropouts demand 20 cents."

"Yeah, it's bad. And the liberals down here, the anarchists, the Communists—nothing's happening, Mrs. Jones—so they turned into transvestites. They're really only half into it but they're into it."

"What do you do, kid?," I asked, "just sit on these benches and rot and wait?"

"I write scripts for television." He named one of the shows he wrote. I didn't know it. All I watched on television was the boxing matches. He went on: "I just wrote two scripts, got $6,000 for each of them. Each took about eight hours. I hardly remember writing them. The money's so easy I can't resist, I can't stop."

"You've got a right. It beats working for McDonald's."

Just then a large tractor affair making much noise and painted yellow came by behind us. My friend held his ears. "Jesus, I can't stand it! What are they doing with that thing? What does it mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything. The city buys those things and then sends them out to belabor a couple of guys sitting on a bench with a hangover. That's their function. It's that simple."

"It's disgusting."

"You shouldn't be out here. You ought to be home in a chair with a vodka-7 in your hand."

"I have come out here to get away from my wife."

"Sorry."

"I came in drunk last night and she says I hit her. I don't remember. It was something about two ashtrays, one was on top of the other. I couldn't stand it."

"A lot of things preceded those two ashtrays."

"Yes."

"I have trouble with women, too."

"Yeah, I've read your shit."

"They read your writing, they know what you are. Then they come in and try to change you. Don't drink, if you love me. Learn the fox-trot. Attend the family picnic. See your local pastor."

"Why do they do that?"

"I don't know why, totally. But I think I have part of it. The woman is the child-bearer and the child-trainer, whether she knows it or not, whether she wants it or not she has this inherent streak. Raising a child to most women means raising it as per the woman's knowledges and prejudices. It's hard work. So she begins by trying to be the man-trainer. If they are able to train the man, they feel that surely they'll be able to train the child. We are the great testing ground for somebody else's future."

"Maybe that's why I hit her."

"No, it was the ashtrays."

"I've got a secretary. She's not much but I fuck her."

"That's what secretaries are for, especially if they are women's libbers."

"Do the women hate you?"

"No, they hate the men who agree with them."

"My secretary helps me write."

"That's good. What do you do, tape it and let her type it?"

"No. I lay down on top of her and I play with her tits. I keep laying down on top of her and playing with her tits and she writes. Soon it's over and we've got something."

"It comes harder for me. I use two sheets of paper and a carbon."

"That whole TV scene is too bizarre, it really is. After lunch the producers will send out a chauffeur in a limousine and they'll come back with some

13-year-old girls."

"Marvelous. Think of a 13-year-old girl. It must be goodness beyond goodness."

"That's not for us, my friend."

"No, you'll just keep writing your scripts and sitting here on this bench for 40 more years. Not much will change."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. See those bars holding up those swings? Well, they'll be a little thicker, that's all. And rounder. And they'll be of some silver substance that will glow in the sun."

"Yeah. And the women will just wear little dots over their cunts and tits, the littlest of dots."

"Yes, only the cunt will have moved up from between the legs and be placed under the left arm pit."

"Oh no. And guys will walk about on two cocks like legs."

"That's it. Well, I have to go see if my car is fixed."

"I have to go see if my car is fixed, too."

"Your name is?"

"Joe."

"I'll see you again sometime, Joe."

"Yeah, sometime when my car is getting fixed and your car is getting fixed."

I left him there and began the long walk back to 6th street. Everything was all right for some blocks, and then when I was four or five blocks away from the Bug Builders I heard footsteps behind me, female footsteps. I was walking slowly and she was walking just as slowly about a yard behind me and a little to the left toward the street side. It went on for a full block. On the next block she still followed me.

This can't be true, I thought. I'm addled, goofy, inept. It's the hangover, the sea air.

I slowed to let her by. As I slowed, she slowed. I slowed more; she slowed. I gave up and walked my normal pace. She followed along, a yard behind and a little to the left on the street side. Then we came to a signal. We both waited, her just the same distance behind me. When the signal changed I bent over as if to tie a shoelace. She walked past me and across.

On the next block I followed her, just a yard behind. She was bowlegged, just a bit, about 32, but she had a most marvelous behind. Well, not quite. It seemed a bit *square*, somehow. But after a while I got to like that squareness. It revolved with the power of the mare who knew she was there, still dangerous and damned able; not just able to catch the cock but the soul, too. It was under a tan dress and it moved. Her hair was very black and knotted into a tight, stern bun, and you knew if it were let loose it would flow down to her hips. And the hips were much there. My eyes went from the buttocks to the hips to the neck, down to the hips again and then settled upon the buttocks: the power to save a man or kill a man or ignore a man. I followed her for two blocks. Then at the next signal she crossed the street away from me. I stood and watched her. She walked across the parking lot and toward a small semi-grocery and liquor store. Just as she got to the doorway she turned and looked back at me. Her face flushed a deep red. Then she walked into the store. I was on 6th street. Bug Builder's was three-quarters of a block the other way. I walked on down and into the office. I was lucky: my car was ready.

I met the Crottys quite by accident. That is, I was looking for a new place to live and they both came to the door and looked at me through the screen.

"I saw your 'vacancy' sign. And this woman's pregnant. We need a place to live."

The woman's name was Darlene and I had gotten her pregnant after taking her to the racetrack. Mrs. Crotty got the key and took us to an apartment in the upper back. I took the place and Mr. and Mrs. Crotty simply became people I paid the rent to. He was 58, she was 55. The only time I saw them was when they drove their Volks to the market. They had no visitors except a son and a daughter who came by separately and sporadically.

Darlene and I lived together without much velocity or hope. The child was born, we lived together three more months, then the split came. Darlene and the child moved a few blocks away and I moved down to the front court.

It was a good place to drink beer, there by the front window facing the street. The typewriter was there, and outside large green brush covered everything, along with the vines and small trees.

The Crottys, who hadn't liked Darlene, became noticeable. I'd come home and find large paper bags against the door. The bags contained various items: green onions, oranges, apples, tomatoes and sometimes a shirt. Mrs. Crotty would knock in the mid-afternoons. "Don't eat anything, I'm going to bring you a plate." The plate was most often fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, green peas, tomatoes and green onions, plus biscuits. She also made a good boiled beef plate. And every other night Mrs. Crotty would come down about 8:30 p.m. slightly intoxicated, and say, "Come on down and drink with us."

When I came down, Mr. Crotty would be passed out across the table, head in arms; he would be in his undershirt and tan army pants. Full and near-full bottles would be here and there about the table. The breakfastnook was always very clean and the red radio would be on to a popular music station. "Paddy," she'd say, "wake up. We've got a guest." Up the head would come and he'd look at me. "Hi! How ya doin'? Have a drink."

Mrs. Crotty would set a full quart of Eastside in front of me. We'd drink from early evening until 3 or 4 in the morning. Most of the nights were the same. We'd sing the old songs, songs of the twenties and thirties. We'd talk about the crazy people in the neighborhood or about crazy people we had known. Mr. Crotty was a good storyteller, but he'd soon pass out again.

"Well, Mrs. Crotty, I've got to go."

"Oh, shit, stay. That old fart-sack , just because he passes out it don't mean nothing."

I'd stay or Mrs. Crotty would get angry. Sometimes, although not too often, I'd kiss her, a long hard kiss, spreading her lips back. Finally, after many more cigarettes and a few more bottles of beer, I'd leave.

The conversations, each time I went down there, were about the same. Mrs. Crotty and I would discuss our hemorrhoid operations. We'd talk all about the depression days of the thirties. We'd talk about the days we used to sit around in bars. And like all drunks, we'd get around to God, finally. But the Crottys got very upset when God came around, or the Pope; I wasn't very much interested in either of them and it made them furious, almost to the point of murder. I tried to stay away from that area.

The drinking was every other night and sometimes I got out of stride or I'd be at the typewriter. Mrs. Crotty would come down.

"We're drinking. We'll be looking for you."

"I can't make it."

"Can't make it? Why?"

"I'm at the typewriter."

"Ah, piss on that typewriter! Come on down, we're drinking!"

"I've got to finish this thing."

"Come on to the door. I want to tell you something."

"O.K."

"Listen, you rotten son of a bitch, I told you we're drinking. Now you son of a bitch, come on down!" Mrs. Crotty never swore when she was sober.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Crotty. I can't."

Then she would unleash her total drunken vocabulary. She was pretty good. She would reappear in 30 minutes and make another pitch. If I didn't respond, I'd get the note under the door next: "Bastard, you never paid me back that 50 dollars I lent you and if you don't pay it back I'm going to the police."

One night I didn't make it down and somebody bumped into their court with their automobile while trying to park in the apartment house lot across the way. I heard his voice: "HEY, WHERE IN THE HELL DID YOU LEARN TO DRIVE?"

"WHO ARE YOU?" the guy in the car hollered back.

"I'M PATRICK CROTTY AND I OWN THIS GODDAMNED DUMP, THAT'S WHO I AM! WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?"

There was no answer.

Meanwhile the Crottys and my days went on. Then I met a madwoman, her name was Gerda.

"I don't like the Karates," she said.

"It's the Crottys," I said.

Gerda would stand in one of my windows and scream into the street. She screamed as if I were mutilating her.

"What the fuck you doing?" I'd ask.

"I'm enhancing your reputation."

"Let's leave it the way it is."

Gerda was mad. The front door to my place was made of glass. If she came over and I wasn't home, she'd break all the glass panels out of the door. Sometimes she'd do it when I was there.

“She’s crazy,” Mr. Crotty would say replacing the glass panels, “what do you see in her?”

“I guess it’s her body.”

There were pieces of glass all over the rug. I always drank barefoot in my place and I gathered all these pieces of glass in both feet. I had to go to a doctor and have them sliced out.

“How did this happen?” my doctor would ask.

“A woman.”

After a month or so I left the Crottys. I moved out and went to live in Gerda’s house. She charged me rent, too. Then I broke the glass out her front door. Gerda and I had difficult days and nights. One night she ran me out and I went to a motel on Western Avenue and drank a quart of Cutty Sark. In the morning I went over and got my shit, packed it into my car and drove around looking for a place to live. I passed the Crottys. There was a sign on the front lawn: VACANCY. I went back and knocked.

“What happened?”

“She ran my ass off.”

“I told you she was crazy.”

“I know. I saw your VACANCY sign. What you got open?”

“It’s your old place. We fixed it up nice.”

“Can I move back in?”

“Sure, but it’s 10 bucks more, we fixed it up.”

“All right.”

I gave them a month’s rent and moved back in. It had been fixed up all right. They’d even taken the glass door out and replaced it with a wooden one. Brown bags full of goodies appeared at the door again, plus the free dinners. We had our Eastside drunk, sang songs. Mr Crotty passed out and I kissed Mrs. Crotty.

Then two or three nights later I vanished. I was gone overnight. The next day I came back about evening. Mr. and Mrs. Crotty were standing in the driveway.

“Where have you been?”

“Gerda’s.”

“I thought so,” said Mrs. Crotty.

“I’m moving back to her place.”

“But she’s insane, don’t you know?”

“I know.”

“There’s no hope for you,” said Mr. Crotty. Then they marched up the driveway and vanished into their court. I went inside and packed.

A week later I was packing again to leave Gerda’s place. I didn’t even drive past the Crottys. I found a place on Oxford Avenue with roaches behind the refrigerator.

I forgot the Crottys for some months, then one evening I was driving in their neighborhood. They had rented my front court, there were lights on in there. I drove on up the driveway, parked and got out. I knocked. Mrs. Crotty answered the door. Mr. Crotty stood behind her.

“I thought I might bring some beer by,” I said.

“We’re watching TV,” said Mr. Crotty.

“Wrong night, eh?”

“Yes.”

“O.K. Maybe I can catch you again on the right night.”

“O.K.”

I got in my car and drove off. I never went back. I moved from the roach place to a court at Carlton Way and Western. About a year went by. One afternoon I went into the liquor store at The Market Basket. As I was standing waiting to get my beer bagged, I noticed somebody staring at me. He had changed. He had seemed to have melted. But it was Mr. Crotty standing by the water fountain just outside the grocery department. I walked up. “Christ,” I said, “not you.”

“Yes, we shop around, you know.”

“Where’s Grace?”

“She’s outside. She’ll be in in a minute.”

I waited. It was a hot summer day in the low 90s. The glass doors opened and there was Mrs. Crotty.

“Hi!” I said.

“Hank!” she said.

He had melted and she had grown; her face was much fatter, she seemed taller and in all the heat she had on a thick black coat, thick heavy collar, long; her face was redder, she was pale. I hardly remember what was said. Some niceties. We were all sober. Then I left. The glass doors opened and I carried my bagged beer to the car, got in, started up and drove off. I don’t think I’ll ever see them again.

1.

Well, so Mailer and his cohorts got him out, he was a writer, there was a book, I haven’t read it—all I know is what I read in the papers while I’m crapping. So, as you know, the writer put the knife to a waiter, “wasting him” as the boys in my time used to say. Which was not good for Mailer either. All right, here we have two writers and a waiter. No we have two writers. Which brings something to this ribbon which is spinning now before me: a man can be a good writer without being good at anything else; in fact, he can be pretty bad at everything else and usually is. Of course, there are people who are pretty bad at everything else and they can’t write either. I might get to reading *In the Belly of the Beast* one of these days. I never could get through *The Naked and the Dead*, feeling it was too close a feed-off on Hemingway. But N. Mailer is an excellent journalist, and while not fit to sit on a parole board, he did what he felt he had to do. So did the other writer.

2.

I have a saying, “You will find the lowest of the breed at the racetracks.” I am there almost every day working out my various systems, waiting the long 30 minutes between races. I don’t know how many of those 30 minutes I have given away over the years sitting there waiting for a race that is generally over in a minute and nine seconds. And at the quarter horse races most of them are finished in 17 seconds plus a tick. A racetrack never has a losing day. For each dollar bet they give back about 85 cents. In Mexico they give back 75 cents. In some of the tracks in Europe they give back 50 cents. It doesn’t matter, the people continue to play. Check the faces at any track going into the last race. You will see the story.

When I came out of the Charity Ward of the L.A. County General Hospital in 1955 after drinking ten years without missing a night or day (except while in jail) they told me that if I ever took another drink I would be dead. I went back to my shack job and I asked her, “What the hell am I going to do now?”

“We’ll play the horses,” she said.

“Horses?”

“Yeah, they run and you bet on them.”

She had found some money on the boulevard so we went out. I had 3 winners, one of them paid over 50 bucks. It seemed very easy.

We went out a second time and I won again.

That night I decided that if I mixed some wine with milk it might not hurt me. I tried a glass, half wine, half milk. I didn’t die. The next glass I tried a little less milk and a little more wine. By the time the night was over I had been drinking straight wine. In the morning I got up without hemorrhaging. After that I drank *and* played the horses. 27 years later I am still doing both. Time is made to be wasted . . .

I was out there again today. There are some creatures out there, shirttails hanging out, shoes run down, eyes dulled. Many are there day after day. How they manage to keep going out there is the mystery. They are losers. But somehow they manage to find entrance fee, somehow they manage to place some feeble bets. But today I saw the worst. I had seen him the day before also. He looked worse than any skid row bum, he had a scabby beard, part of the leather had lifted from his shoes showing parts of his feet—he was barefoot. He wore a greasy brown overcoat but he had a bit of money. I saw him placing some bets. He didn't sit in the stands but on some steps outside the stands and he played a harmonica very badly. I looked at him: he had on some glasses but one of the eyeglasses had fallen out and the one that remained was a dark black. As I walked slowly by he started talking to me. He spoke very rapidly: "Hey, ge out ree hoo nar bah!" Sentences followed that were of similar order. I couldn't imagine this fellow placing a bet or driving an automobile. But he had a right to. Who said he couldn't? And who said he had to *look* a certain way? Or talk a certain way? Society dictated our modes and ways. Maybe he was helpless. I remembered starving in New York City, trying to be a writer. One night I had gone out and bought a bag of popcorn, it was my first food in several days. The popcorn was hot and greasy and salty, each kernel was a miracle. I walked along in a beautiful trance, feeling the kernels enter my body, feeling them in my mouth. My trance was not entirely complete. Two large men walked toward me. They were talking to each other. As they got closer to me, one of them looked up and just as they passed me he said loudly to his buddy: "Jesus Christ, did you see *that*." I was the freak to them, the idiot, the one who didn't fit the mould. I walked along then, the kernels not tasting quite so well.

As I passed the man at the racetrack sitting on his steps I knew that any of us could get lost away from the crowd, some of us even wanted to. I walked down and found a seat. The horses broke from the gate. It was 6 furlongs. I had the one horse in a maiden race. Orange silks. The one horse is usually bad at 6 furlongs but I had a reason for the bet. My horse broke poorly, rushed up, fell back, I lost sight of him, then as they took the curve for home I saw my orange silks again, he was coming from the outside. He seemed to hang in mid-stretch, then he came on again to win drawing out. They put up the price: $14.60. I had it ten win. $73. I got up to go cash my ticket. When I did I no longer saw the man sitting on his steps. I didn't see him for the rest of the day. I'll be looking for him tomorrow. There's a good card going. Three maiden races. I love those maiden races.

3.

What about Fame? they ask me. Will Fame destroy you? Well, now, if I *am* famous and if it destroys me (meaning my talent) then sixty one years of my life will have gone by without my having sensed any of the traps. I think it's easier for a writer to be destroyed by Fame when he is in his twenties. The ladies, the lights, the admiration will do him in. The young have no background to ward Fame off with. Besides, many of the famous are famous not because their work is excellent and original but because the masses identify with the output. And they don't identify with it because it's real but because it is false as most of them are false in their ideals, their actions, their lives. I am thinking now of the richest comedian in the land (they call him a comedian, although he has never made me laugh). This fellow has been dropping one line jokes on the people for decades, beginning long ago on the radio. His jokes are inoffensive and trivial, he has what I think of as an All-American Mickey Mouse Soul. He has burned-out thousands of writers with his flippant little one-liners, and he goes on and on gathering in millions of dollars. His material is thin, inane, useless; he is rich and famous; he is a carbon copy of the masses.

There are writers like this fellow. Their books line the stands of the bookstores in the shopping malls. THE HEARTBEAT'S WAIL. THUNDERBLOSSOM. BLOOD SWORD. These writers are more rich than famous.

Then, there are the *literary* writers of poem, of story, of novel. Their idea is that if something is written tediously enough, if it is involuted enough, if it is hardly understood, then, that's art. Because, you see, this is the way it has been for centuries, they are only carrying on the tradition. These writers are more famous than rich. They are famous because they promote, publish and teach each other, mostly at the universities. They are not rich because they are the only ones who buy each other's books. They complain constantly of the success of such writers as those who put out books entitled THE HEARTBEAT'S WAIL; THUNDERBLOSSOM and so forth. But they write just as badly, only in another way.

So, you see, if you have FAME you can never be sure that you deserve it. You may have your FAME for all the wrong reasons. This might be my case. So, you see, if I have FAME for all the wrong reasons I am already destroyed, and if I have it for the right reasons, I can never be sure of that, so there’s only one thing to do: go on typing, as I have been doing here.

4.

In my old starvation days, prowling the libraries, I did a great deal of reading, mostly in the libraries. The old L.A. Public Library was my favorite. After sitting in Pershing Square and listening to the boys argue about whether there was a God or not I would walk over to the library. After eating up several rooms of books (not really) I found myself in the Philosophy Room. Those boys had some style. They talked about what *mattered*. Or seemed to. Or should. One of the things they talked about was the need for Solitude. That made sense to me. That need. I mean, when I was sitting at a table reading a book and somebody came to my table and sat down it disturbed me. Why sit near me? And when I looked about and saw other *empty* tables, I felt really repulsed. I know that I am supposed to love my fellow man but I don't. I don't hate him; I often dislike him; I just don't want him about. I feel better alone.

I loved Solitude. Still do. I grow when I am alone. People diminish me. Especially men, they seem quite unoriginal. Women, at times, are useful. Also they are funny and tragic. But too many continued hours and days with them leads to madness.

There must be others like me. I always seem to be living with a woman and one acts differently then out of courtesy. But in my in between times of living alone, I had my little delicacies. Like, I'd simply take the phone off the hook, disconnect the doorbell, pull down all the shades and go to bed for 3 or 4 days and nights, just arising now and then to do my toilet, drink water, nibble on a bit of food. These times were precious to me, holy. I was like a battery getting a recharge—off of myself and the absence of Humanity. I have never been lonely. I have been confused, depressed, insane, suicidal, but never lonely in the sense that some person or persons might solve something for me. I never had a television set until I was 52 years old. And I only saw one movie in 20 years—*The Lost Weekend*. I went to check it out for authenticity.

Being alone has always been very necessary to me. At one time I was on one of my hot winning streaks at the racetracks. The money just came to me. A certain basic simple system was working for me. The horses moved south and I walked off my job and followed them down to Del Mar.

It was a good life. I'd win each day at the track. I had a routine. After the track I'd stop off at the liquor store for my fifth of whiskey and my six-pack of beer and the cigars. Then I'd get back into the car and cruise the coast for a new motel room. I liked a different one each night. I'd find a motel, park my stuff, shower, change clothes and then get my ass back into the car and cruise the coast again—this time for an eating place. And what I would look for was an eating place without many people in it. (The worst, I know.) But I didn't like crowds. So, I always found one. Went in and ordered.

So, this particular night, I found a place, went in, sat at the counter, ordered: porterhouse steak with French fries, beer. Everything was fine. The waitress didn't bother me. I sucked at my beer, ordered another. Then the meal came. Goddamn, it looked good. I began. I had a few fine bites, then the door opened and this fellow came in. There were 14 empty stools at the counter. This fellow sat down next to me.

"Hi, Doris, how's it going?"

"O.K, Eddie. How ya doing?"

"Fine."

"What'll ya have, Eddie?"

"Oh, just a cup of coffee, I guess . . ."

Doris brought Eddie his coffee.

"I think the fuel pump on my car is going out . . ."

"Always some damn thing, huh Eddie?"

"Yeah, now my wife needs new plates, Doris."

"You mean houseware?"

"I mean mouthware!"

"Oh, Eddie, ha, ha, ha!"

"Well," Eddie said, "when it rains it pours!"

I picked up my plate and my beer, my fork, my knife, my spoon, my napkin, my ass and moved it all the way over to a far booth. I sat down and began again. As I did I watched Eddie and Doris. They were whispering. Then Doris looked at me: "Is everything all right, sir?"

"Now," I told her, "it is . . ."

Nothing diminishes me like the crowd.

Say like on New Year's night at midnight, everybody screaming, joyous, celebrating; I feel completely denuded, foolish, unhappy. If I am in a room full of them. If I am alone it's better. New Year's Eve is like any other eve to me: I drink.

Or standing with a group, being sworn in to a government job, I feel like I am eating shit stew, facing the flag, pledging allegiance. I always get out of that: I move my lips but in the sound of all the voices I don't have to say any words and nobody knows.

There are certain privacies that are joyous and necessary. I maintain that I have certain inherent rights to oneness and that I am my own keeper. I am not cranky about this bit, just a touch fucking rigid: it creates a comedy of my own that I can laugh at, though soundlessly.

Some refuse to believe that I have these certain beliefs. There was this lady I had lived with for a year or so, a live one, a bit offed by shock therapy but better than most, she said in her cups, one night: "Ah shit . . . I've read your stuff, I've heard you talk . . . you're such a LONER! You're such a fuckin' RECLUSE! How come then you WRITE your stuff and then you send it OUT?"

"It helps pay for all that swill you jam down your throat."

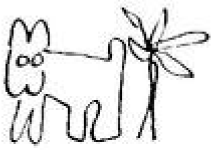
"You mean drink?"

"Yes."

"That's no answer! You're copping out!"

She was right, of course.

I remember reading in the papers about this guy they found in the park. He'd been living in a cave there and coming out at night and living off the picnic scraps. They caught him. And took him off. And when I read that I thought, there but for the grace of the typewriter goes me. The keys are my solitude, my luck, my picnic scraps. Hate me but buy my books. And read the old philosophers on Solitude. And don't write me, phone me, or write like me. And if you ever see me anywhere it isn't me. Forget it.



1

People who call other people assholes generally are.

2

When you’ve considered everything, you’ve considered too much.

3

Human relationships do not work.

4

Brilliant men are created out of desperate circumstances; fools are also.

5

When you marry the woman you also marry her entire family.

6

Most men who sleep late in the morning are a superior breed.

7

Women are braver in situations they have to face alone; men tend to get braver in and before crowds.

8

I have never met a nonimmaculate cat.

9

The poets do the least to become known.

10

Fame is too often the result of bad public taste; Immortality too often a matter of poor critical judgment.

11

I’m often delighted when something terrible happens to me. It’s not so much a matter of masochism, it’s more a feeling of a balance come due; it has to happen, and since it does happen, one greets it with an oblique delight—feeling that after that better things are sure to follow???

12

Keep your sunny-side up. Nobody wants to hear about the night your mother kicked your ass in the deli takeout parlor . . .

13

All the women in my life have become the Reoccuring Woman: their complaints have been just as similar and just as realistic. So I judge them, in comparison, only upon the artistry of their head-jobs and their kitchen work, faithfulness and so forth. And when I line them up in this fashion I can’t come up with a winner. Just a loser: me.

14

Whenever one of my women goes to another man in preference to me, I am thoroughly astonished, especially when I meet him in person. But all things are illusionary, including those dull, drab sons of bitches, so it’s all right, I suppose.

15

Dostoevski was precisely passionate, but when he ended up with Christ in his lap I wrote him off as going the long way around to find what most idiots accepted in the beginning. Not that I didn’t find his journey vibrant. For this, I almost forgave him his final Error. Tolstoy, who ended up the same way, was simply dull throughout. Which I can’t forgive.

16

Religion is not the Opium of the People. It’s a peanut-butter sandwich. On white bread.

17

A whore is a woman who takes more than she gives. A man who takes more than he gives is called a businessman.

18

When the agony of all the people is heard, nothing will be done.

19

I am only a realist in certain areas. For instance, it discourages me that people have upper and lower intestines. As I watch people, I am conscious of these (and other) parts. I’m hexed. For instance, when a man says to me, “She’s really a beautiful woman,” I feel like answering, “I won’t know until I examine the healthiness of her excreta.”

20

The best people are the ones you never meet.

21

I much prefer it when a woman discards me. Then I am sure that the error is hers.

22

I have met both the rich and the poor and have found them to be equally unnatural in their positions.

23

There is a certain actress who must be nearing 70, at least, for I saw her in movies when I was a boy and I’m now 62. But she is photographed again and again as looking 32. It has gone on for decades. Marvelous, I think, young forever! And she is often photographed with her sisters, and they’ve all held on well. They are all photographed smiling together, heads always held upward to hide the neck lines. Marvelous, I think, we all need the dream.

24

One of the most depressing places to be upon the earth is to be sitting in some Los Angeles café at 9:35 A.M. and having the waitress hand you the menu of various egg delicacies as her ankles are thin and her buttocks resigned, she has been used and abandoned by her men and she just wants the rent and a way to go, and then you look up and in a mellifluous voice full of victory and hope and understanding you order item #3, the cut-rate special.

25

A criminal might be defined as one outnumbered by those who generally don’t do what he does except in secret or different ways.

26

Check your ass for the shining candle.

27

Of all the women who have claimed they have hated me I have believed all of them.

28

It’s exactly as good as it’s ever going to get.

29

Will Rogers once said, “I never met a man I didn’t like.” I never liked Will Rogers. But I liked his statement. I liked some men, temporarily. But somehow I didn’t like him. But he was probably luckier than I was and most probably a better man to be around. If you liked pussycats.

30

One night Babe Ruth, who was one hell of a drinker, held Rabbit Maranville, the shortstop, out of the window of their 12th-floor hotel room by his heels.

“Go on, you fucker, drop me!” the Rabbit screamed in this story I read.

I like that story. It would have been a much better one if he had dropped him.

31

One of the great things is when a Suicide meets a Suicide (it helps more when one is a man and the other a woman) over drinks and they talk about all the times they’ve botched their tries and they begin to laugh about that, and it’s really very funny because you really meant to do it. Now the radio is on, there’s a pack of cigarettes on the coffee table and the rug is upon the floor, and life is almost delightful, for a moment . . .

32

That’s enough. See you in Dresden.

I was past midnight. The drinks had come, I never knew quite from where, and some cigarettes too. And the juke just blazed away. Hours of stale cigarette smoke had turned the air blue gray, and the flies and roaches were dulled and sickened and drunk, and the patrons too. It was a place no sensible being would ever want to be in, but not being a sensible being, there I was.

The urinal was impossible, walking in there you were hit by a deadly waft of a century of piss and puke. And nobody ever used the toilet, it was dark and caked and dry and there wasn’t any water in the tank. And the lid had long been gone, the tank lid, the toilet lid, and the whiskey and beer spiders had taken over, threading their webs in there, waiting for something.

I refocused on myself and found myself sitting next to this guy I had never seen before. He was in his mid-30s, wore this leather jacket. Maybe he had been buying me drinks. I didn’t know. Nobody else sat near us.

He had a pack of cigarettes near his drink. Pall Malls. I reached for his pack, got it, pulled a smoke out and lit up.

“Did I tell you you could have a cigarette?” he asked me.

“No.”

“Don’t go touching my cigarettes again!”

He pulled the Pall Malls back in front of him.

Everything was so weary. There was always somebody flexing up against you. They couldn’t bear up with the slightest joke, the tiniest confrontation. Everything was a challenge to them. They awakened angry every morning and they stayed that way. They didn’t want to lose and they didn’t know how to win. Constipated lives full of shit.

I reached over, pulled the Pall Malls back, took a cigarette out, broke it in half, threw it back into the ashtray.

He just sat there.

He sat there a long time.

He looked straight forward.

Then he spoke.

"Listen, I just got out of jail for aggravated assault! I don't want to go back there again!"

"Don't fuck with me then." I told him.

We both sat there. It was a hot stupid night. We breathed in the gray blue smoke as the rich were out on their sailing ships or drugged to sleep. The trouble with life was that there were only tiny periods of action between all the vast spaces and the people just waited as Death sat on his red hot laughing ass.

"Just don't fuck with me!" he repeated.

"Get yourself a hobbyhorse with a wooden asshole and you'll feel better," I said.

I could feel the anger ripping through him. I wasn't lucky enough to have anger. With anger you could react, wrong or right. I just had a pale and tired disgust. He was drinking whiskey. I was at the bottom of a stale bottle of beer.

"Buy me a drink," I said, "a whiskey."

He motioned Tommy down.

"Two whiskeys."

They arrived and I drained mine down. He drained his.

"Two more whiskeys," he said to Tommy.

"It's all right," I told the guy, "I don't want to overbum."

"Drink up," he said. "I'm getting ready to kick your ass."

The whiskeys were before us.

"You mean if I drink this, you're going to kick my ass?"

"Right."

"You know I can't turn down a drink?"

"I know."

"It's not fair," I said. then reached down and got the whiskey, drained it.

He drained his.

"Let's go," he said.

"Wait," I said.

"What is it?"

“One more,” I said, “to dull the pain.”

“Two whiskeys,” he said to Tommy.

The whiskeys arrived. They sat there golden and powerful among the dead flies and the half-dead patrons. My father had always warned me that I would come to this. He had wanted me to be an engineer. Jesus Christ, that would have been worse than this.

I drained my whiskey. The guy got his. Then I stood up and walked toward the front bar door, opened it and walked out. It was dark out there. He was lit up a moment in the doorway, my mind noted a neon sign and I didn’t even see it coming.

I was flat on my ass. Sprawled like a fucking land crab. No pain. Just a slight tinkle of wonder. The guy was good. I was too. At absorbing punches, punches and drinks. I could take all they could offer. Sometimes I just wore them down; other times, I didn’t.

I got up, swung and missed, but as he sidestepped he slipped into some fresh puke somebody had recently deposited and I hit him in the throat, heard him give a little gulp, his eyes rolled a bit in surprise—he was used to winning—then I dug a left hook toward his gut, he blocked it with his elbow, countered with a hard right to my chin and I was down on my ass again, feeling strange, as if I were in too deep with no place to go. He kicked at my head. I saw it coming, grabbed his shoe, was surprised to have it, lifted it up as I stood up—and he was on his ass.

I stood back then, thinking maybe we could call it like that. Let it be, you know.

I knew I had been lucky. He knew it too.

He got up and came on in. I shot a jab. It was useless, I didn’t have my shoulder behind it. I took his next shot fairly well, was almost proud, then he blasted me with his next and I was down on my ass again as the prowl car pulled up. I saw it. I was happy to see it. I sat there smiling at the prowl car.

Then I felt him lifting me up. I heard him saying, “I’m just taking him home, officers, he’s going to be all right.”

They sat and watched as he walked me toward his car, unlocked it. Then he put me in the front seat. Then he got around the other side and got in, started the car. The cops watched us drive off.

He kept driving through the city streets, then we were in a dark area, open country, much space, many trees. He just drove along.

Maybe he's taking me out here to try to finish me off, I thought.

But that wasn't bothering me.

"Hey," I said, "I need a goddamned drink."

"There's a pint in the glove compartment. What's your name?"

"Hank," I said, reaching in and getting the bottle.

"I'm Robert," he said.

I peeled the pint, opened it, took a hit. I passed the bottle to Robert, he took a hit, passed it back.

"What do you do?" he asked.

"Nothing."

We drove along and then Robert said, "Watch this . . ."

There was a small car in front of us. Robert pulled up alongside and stared at the two guys in the other car. They were a couple of kids, maybe 19. Robert kept driving along and staring at the guys. They looked scared. They pulled ahead and Robert went after them. He caught up with them and then banged the side of his car into them. They almost went off the road. They both started screaming.

"*Hey, what the fuck are you trying to do?*"

"*Are you crazy?*"

Robert just drove alongside of them and stared. Then he banged his car into theirs again.

"*Hey! Jesus Christ, you asshole!*"

Robert banged them again, and this time the driver lost control, he spun off the road, piled into some brush. Robert drove off the road blocking their exit.

"Which one do you want?" he asked me.

"I'll take the guy who gets out second."

We climbed out and waited. The car door opened and a kid in a gray sweatshirt got out. A nice blond boy.

"*You fucking guys crazy?*" he asked.

Robert walked up and cracked him with a right. The kid dropped to his knees and held his head.

"Jesus, what did you do that for?" he asked.

Robert grabbed him by the hair and banged his head against the side of the car.

My guy got out of the other side of the car. I walked toward him. Before I could get to him he reached into his back pocket, got his wallet and threw it toward me.

“Please take it,” he said, “just don’t hurt me.”

I picked up the wallet, took the bills out, stuck them in my pocket, threw the wallet back.

“You should never turn down a fight,” I told the kid. “It weakens the will.”

I turned and looked over at Robert. His guy was out cold and he was stripping him of his wristwatch and a ring.

“Come on, Robert, let’s get out of here.”

Then the guy had me from behind, he had me in a good choke hold, I couldn’t breathe, shots of bright red flashed; I kicked backwards, landed on one of his shins. His grip slipped slightly and I was able to turn sideways but he got the grip on me again, but I reached for his balls, yanked, and he let go. He doubled over, holding his parts. I walked around and kicked him in the ass. He flopped over on the ground, moaning. I stood there looking at him. Just a kid who wanted to fuck the chicks. Just a kid who wanted to go to college.

Robert walked up beside me. He kicked the kid in the head, hard. The kid straightened fast, like he had been electrocuted, then he went limp.

“You don’t have to do that, Robert. Show some mercy.”

“Mercy is for suckers.”

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“Yeah, I did. Now forget it.”

“I didn’t like that.”

“What you don’t like doesn’t matter.”

We walked back toward the car, got in. Robert kicked it over and we were back on the road. I took a hit of the scotch, passed it toward Robert. He waved it off: “Naw, I don’t drink with weaklings.”

“Good. All the more for me.”

We just drove along through the night and I sucked at the scotch.

“Just like a baby with his bottle. You alkies are weak,” he said.

I didn’t answer.

“You can’t cut it without the booze, can you?” Robert asked.

“No.”

I took another hit as we drove along. I wasn’t interested in being weak or strong. I just wanted to get by the hours. I wasn’t even interested in impressing myself.

“My father was a drunk,” Robert said.

“Did it kill him?” I asked.

“The cops killed him.”

“Oh.”

This guy evidently came from a long criminal line. I could feel it sitting inside of him, locked there. I sensed something else in him, something that wanted to be kind and easy but the other part was too overpowering. He was just naturally and automatically dangerous. I liked some of that but not all of it. His fury had no humor. It was like a job.

“I’ll take that drink,” he said.

I passed the bottle over. He took a hit, handed it back.

“Mom just got out. She did five years. Homicide.”

“Great. Sounds like a great woman. “She is. You done time?”

“Nothing,” I said, “just the drunktanks.”

“Stick with me. I’ll put you through college.”

“Yeah.”

We drove along. It was a nice warm night. I felt relaxed. It was nice to get out of that bar for a moment. Those people sitting on those stools were just lonely. It was a lonely world. With everybody pretending it wasn’t, pretending that they were handling it. They couldn’t even wipe their bungholes. Nothing was drabber than the masses and that’s all there was.

“If you want,” said Robert, “we can work together every night. You’ve got a certain cool that most guys don’t have.”

“I’m not cool,” I said, “I’m just tired.”

“That don’t matter. We can work together.”

“I’ll think about it.”

What was worrying me was that the pint was almost empty. And I knew that Robert’s criminal insanity would not be so enthralling without drink. Nothing was without it. Drink elevated me. Without it I was common. I didn’t want to be common. It was too hard.

I sucked at the bottle.

“Drink is a form of escape,” I told Robert. “I like to escape.”

He just kept driving. I liked the sound of the motor and the darkness going by. It was like sailing through Time untouched. Movement was unchallenged action.

“Hey,” he said, “I think we got one!”

There was a car ahead. I could sense him elevating into his life-meaning. He was like a tiger closing in on the wildebeest.

It was a small model car, a guy and his girl driving along, a young couple. Robert pulled up next to them and stared. They just looked straight ahead pretending we weren’t there. But we were there.

“Robert,” I said, “let’s let them go. They just want to live.”

“That’s *their* problem.”

The guy in the other car reduced speed, thinking maybe we would go on. It was his mistake. Robert braked and slowed next to them. Then he just leaned his car against theirs and pushed them off the road.

We got out of our car. And the kid got out of his. Ow, he was big. A little drunk, hair down in his eyes. But he was large, big, he was going to protect his girl. Probably a highschool football star, somebody used to winning.

He stood there in the moonlight and puffed out his chest. He was magnificent and he knew it.

“Okay,” he said, “I’ll take either one of you guys. Who wants it first?”

“Listen, sir,” I said, “we were just kind of clowning around. Let’s call it off.”

Robert looked at me.

“What are you, some kind of homo?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Okay, I’ll handle this hot dog.”

Robert moved toward the big kid. His girl got out of the car. She was magnificent too. Long hair, great body. They were the magnificent pair. The kid would someday be a corporate lawyer. She would be a fashion model. They were winners geared to get it all. I felt as if we were trespassing some holy land of the future.

“Kick his ass, Lance!” screamed the girl.

“No problem, Darlene.”

The big kid and Robert moved toward each other. Then they circled. It was very quiet. You could hear their feet moving in the dirt. The moon seemed to be watching. Everything inhaled. The weeds inhaled, the trees inhaled, the clouds; then there was a movement, fiercely a fist landed upon a head and Robert dropped.

He got right up.

What am I going to do? I thought, if this guy kicks Robert's ass?

All I wanted to do was to be back in my dirty room, in that bed, covers pulled up, staring at the ceiling, waiting. I did that a lot.

There was another sound. And the big kid was down on the ground. You couldn't even see those shots coming. It wasn't a fight of men, it was a fight of rattlesnakes.

The big kid got up and Robert landed again, not as solid this time but enough to stagger the kid. And as Robert moved forward the girl hit him with something from behind. It stopped him a moment and then he looked at me: "Take care of the broad while I finish this guy!"

I ran over to the girl and grabbed both of her hands. Christ, she was beautiful! Her eyes blazed in anger and fright, her body whirled, convoluted. I actually got a hard-on just holding her like that. Even in the confusion she seemed to notice that.

She spit in my face. "You ugly beggar!"

Then she brought her knee up and tried to de-ball me. She just missed and I slapped her hard, saw her stagger in the moonlight, her long blond hair jumping deliciously into space. I grabbed her and kissed her, she bit my lip, I screamed, landed one in her gut and she dropped, her skirt falling back, showing long sheathed legs glistening magically.

Then Robert was standing next to me.

"I finished him off," he said. He looked down at the girl. "Let's fuck her."

"No."

I reached down and helped her up. She was a bit crazed. She was very close to me. She looked at me.

"Don't kill him, please don't kill him. I love him!"

"It's going to be all right," I told her. "Please don't worry."

"Hey! What's with *you?*" asked Robert. "I'm going to fuck this bitch!"

"No," I said, "it's not right."

"Do you think anything we're doing is right? Why do you keep drawing lines?"

He gave me a hard push and then grabbed the girl, pushing her toward some brush.

"No, no, no! *Please!*" she said.

"Shut up," said Robert.

Then she must have attacked him, done something against him. He retaliated. She screamed and he dragged her to the brush. I walked back to the car, got the pint and had the last hit. Then I walked over and looked at the guy. I bent over him. He looked asleep. I could see him breathing. He wasn't dead. Fine. He could still be a corporate lawyer. Then I walked over to their car, opened the door, got in. There was a bag on the floor. I looked in there. It was a bottle of expensive wine, only a bit of it gone. My life was renewed. I went back to Robert's car, leaned against it and sucked at the wine.

After a while Robert came along. He stood there looking at me.

"It was great," he said, "she loved it. I fucked her, then I made her suck me off, then I sodomized her. She loved it."

"I'll bet."

"Yeah, she did."

"Let's get out of here—"

"She's waiting for you, Hank. She wants more."

"Cut the crap. You haven't killed her, have you?"

"No, she's just laying out there waiting for more, her legs spread."

"Let's go."

The big kid was still stretched out. We got into Robert's car and started back toward town. Everything was still quiet and dark, except for the gentle hum of the motor. It might have been as if nothing had happened. The trees acted as if everything were the same, and the asphalt road acted as if nothing had ever happened—only the moon seemed to know—and there was a covering over Robert now, like a slime, it climbed all over him, into his eyes, his ears, his mouth; it was under his armpits, it was between his toes, it seeped and crawled him and it had nothing to do with morals, with right or wrong; it was something else, something very ugly and unexplainable covered him.

"See you found a bottle," he said.

"Yeah. I got lucky."

"Even if you didn't have the guts to fuck that bitch you shoulda jacked-off over her body."

"Yeah, I guess I missed my chance."

We were getting back into town, into the poor section. Robert reached somewhere and then tossed a stack of bills into my lap.

"Your half. That kid was loaded."

"Thanks, you're very honest."

"Got to be. We got a good thing going."

I gave him my address. Like a good thug, he knew the city, he got me right there. We pulled in front of the room-inghouse. The whole neighborhood had been asleep for at least five hours.

"Listen," he said, "the night's not over. I'd like you to meet my mom."

"I'm sure she's great, Robert, but I just want to go in and get some rest."

I got on out. Then Robert was off in his car.

I got the key out, opened the front door, then walked up the stairway and at the first turn I saw the framed painting of Jesus. He looked pained, like a young guy whose girl had just left him to run off with the dope dealer.

I got into my room, pissed in the sink, got out of my clothes except for the undershirt, got into the unmade bed with all that money and my wine bottle. I had never seen that much money. I bunched the pillow up and sat there in the dark sucking on the wine bottle.

Things went by, things went by fast, things went by so fast that they never took form.

A mouse came out, it clambered up the hot plate, then ran up the handle of my coffeepot, hung there halfway on the handle and looked at me. I could see it in the lightening dark, the lightning dark. It looked at me and I looked at the mouse and it didn't like me there in its room. Then, in a tick, it was gone.

I was alone again, I always felt better being alone. When you're alone, the only problem is yourself. It's nicer that way. You stay out of trouble. I was really a nice guy. I knew that.

I finished off the wine bottle, threw it to the floor, un-bunched the pillow, rolled on my belly and, ass-up to the demented ceiling, I slept.

Let’s begin by saying this is a work of fiction and then let’s go on from there. I first met Steve Cosmos in Paris, at least that’s the name he was going under then and the name I remember best. Cristina and I were in Paris because the editors had dragged my ass over there to do interviews for the press. Also, I was writing a screenplay for Jean Sasoon, the French director, and we were staying at his Paris apartment along with his wife, the actress of some fame, who simply went under the name of Barbette. All the whole thing meant was much eating and drinking, drinking and eating, and drinking and drinking. I didn’t understand it but I didn’t care.

Anyhow, Jean Sasoon loved to talk about Steve Cosmos. Sasoon loved freaks and Cosmos was a freak, and I was a freak, that’s why I was around.

So, this night who walks in but Cosmos himself, one of the ten most wanted men on the Continent. Mostly he did things to banks and gambling casinos, but he had many little sidelines.

We shook hands.

“Aha!” he said. “I saw you on TV and you got drunk and gave those shits what they had coming.”

“I understand you take from the shits what you got coming,” I said.

Cosmos laughed. “Oh, yes, it’s an almost continuous thing.”

“Pleased to meet you,” said Cristina.

Cosmos looked. “Ah, what a *charming* girl! Are you with Chinaski?”

“No, he’s with me.”

Sasoon had gone to the kitchen where he was preparing something.

“*Ah!*” said Sasoon, a quite culinary “Ah,” as if he had devised some magic and delicate blending of cookery. Cosmos, being French, ran into the kitchen to view and taste the moment, perhaps add something to it?

Cristina and I glanced at each other. We had met the great man. I refilled our wineglasses.

Cosmos had a gentle style and grace, you could see that right off. Strange white-blond hair, very straight back, a pink boy’s face, a face full of pranks and laughter. His eyes were very large and round.

Then Barbette came in from somewhere. She saw Cosmos and started right in on him vocally. She kept on and on. A concerned tirade. Cosmos gave small answers, acted astonished, smiled, laughed. My French is worse than my German and I have almost no German, but what it was, she was telling him: “You were seen in a bank today. I have a source. What were you doing in the bank?”

“Walking around.”

“Don’t you know your posters are out everywhere? They are looking for you!”

“But I was there and they couldn’t see me.”

“Why don’t you hide low? Why do you stick your butt in their faces? You’re a fool! What are you trying to do? Do you think you’re God? For a man who has been around as much as you, you have the brain of a grasshopper, of a snail! Do you think I would enjoy you in jail?”

“No, neither of us.”

“Then why are you such a fool? Why—”

Barbette went on and on.

Cosmos bent his head to the right, stuck his left thumb into his left ear and let his tongue loll out. The message was clear: All existence was stupid and it really didn’t matter what any of us did.

Barbette got it, laughed. The lecture was over. Everybody was back to speaking English.

Sasoon turned from his steaming and delicious pots.

“The guy, the other night, he lost all his money at roulette because he played honest and he came out onto the grounds drunk and fell full-length into the lake in his tuxedo, came up dripping mud and slime!”

“Ah!” said Cosmos, “what an ending, yet I’m still here.”

After eating we really got into the wine, fine French wine, it really rolled on down and in, you can drink it forever. Corks were pulled and pulled, cigars lit.

Cosmos kept repeating, quite seriously, through a smile:

“I have no interest in the police. They only have an interest in me.”

I heard from Cristina later that I was the fool: putting my arms about the shoulders of Cosmos and Sasoon, saying over and over and *over*: “You guys are my buddies! I really *like* you guys! You guys are my buddies! We all got *class!*”

What Cristina meant about the fool part was the repetition: they had to keep hearing it. But it’s difficult in this life to ever meet exceptional men, and along with the good French wine this put me out of balance.

I *do* remember other portions. Cosmos had a trick to pull elsewhere. We all managed to get into Sasoon’s car and we drove small dark streets under Cosmos’ direction. Finally, along a tall row of hedges Cosmos said, “Stop here.”

He stepped out.

“Now leave.”

As we drove off, some of us looked back. Cosmos had pulled the neck of his trenchcoat upwards, and as he walked off he looked over his shoulder as if there was something there following him. He was right: it always was.

It was about a year later when we saw Cosmos again. I had finished the screenplay and Sasoon came to America to try to hustle up a backer. A producer. He rented a house on the beachfront down at Venice. Don’t get lost. I’m speaking about Sasoon: he rents the house. *Rented* the house. (I hate fucking with tenses, it makes me tense.) All right. Sasoon had Cosmos with him. They had purchased two expensive motorcycles and two old, long, cheap, gas-eating cars which they considered “class,” or as they put it: “great buys.” Here in L.A., we might refer to them as “Mexican Specials,” which is not racist, only accurate. I’ve driven any number of Mexican Specials but never by choice, and I don’t believe the American-Mexicans do either.

The house was next to a house next to an oil well. The house had 12 separate rooms, each with its own bed, and next to each room was another room with a shower and toilet. This was good for Sasoon, a ladies’ man, and he often stocked up with four or five women in each room but he never did fill all 12, although one night he got up to 11. His excellence with the ladies backfired when he was looking for producers because he usually ended up in bed with the producers’ wives and this pissed them to no good end.

I met many famous people in that house: producers, actors, directors. The problem with the famous when you meet them is that they don’t seem to be very much. They just stand around and sit around with their shoes on and usually don’t do or say much. In fact, they appear to be dull. (I usually take my shoes off.) I wasn't much luckier with the producers than Sasoon was. He had pointed one out to me who was interested in producing my screenplay. I was with Cristina one night and I was leaning against the bar at Musso's and this producer, let's call him Medicino, well, Medicino saw me at the bar and left his table and walked up and said, "Hello, Chinaski."

"Oh, Mr. Medicino."

He got into it. He was going to produce a movie. It was about a writer from the '60s, now dead. I couldn't read this writer. No knock against this writer: I can't read any of the writers. This is all right, it's the way it is with me. Then the bad part came: he told me what he was going to title the movie.

"Wait," I said, "you're not joking: you're really going to call this thing *The Heart's Boomerang*?"

"Yes, I like that title."

"Listen, you use that title and I've got to equate you with some guy in a circle-jerk singing 'God Bless America.'"

I was stunned: Mr. Medicino whirled and walked back to his table without a word. No fuckin' sense o' humor.

"Well," said Cristina, "there goes your screenplay."

"Let's ask the orchestra to stand," I said, and nodded the barkeep over for refills.

Cosmos, down at Venice, was more cheerful. We shook hands and grinned upon meeting again.

"I hear you go to the racetrack," he said.

"Every day. Sometimes at night, too. On a good day I'll listen to some Mahler and play eighteen races."

"You going tomorrow?"

"If I'm alive, of course" . . .

The next day he was there.

"You play the daily double?" he asked.

"No."

"The pick-six?"

"No."

"Exactas?"

"No."

“What do you bet?”

“Straight win.”

“No place, no show?”

“Straight win only.”

“You can’t win any money that way,” Cosmos said.

I didn’t answer.

Cosmos didn’t win the double. He showed me his losing tickets after the race, almost proudly. He had studied the racing form intently but there was no pattern to his betting: 6-2, 4-7, 7-3, 8-9, 10-4, 8-3. Each was a $10 ticket. He was $60 out.

“You see what happened?” he asked.

“What?”

“The eight horse broke down in the first race and the nine broke down in the second, I had a broken-leg daily double.”

“The eight and the nine probably would have lost even if they hadn’t broken down.”

“I had a broken-leg daily double,” he repeated as if he hadn’t heard me.

After each race it was the same. He showed me a handful of losing tickets but he always had some excuse. Well, at least he had money to shit away from somewhere.

In the eighth race I had two-win on a long shot. It was a little long-shot play I had devised after studying volumes of race results from tracks in Canada, Mexico and the United States.

“I have no respect for you for betting a horse like that,” Cosmos said.

“What the hell, it paid seventy-six dollars.”

“It was a stupid bet,” he said.

That night Sasoon phoned me.

“Steve said he had a broken-leg daily double.”

“He had that,” I said.

“Cosmos wants to talk to you.”

“Put him on.”

“Ank,” he said, “I feel the pain . . . Life is for nothing.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

"When I win, I feel nothing, when I lose, I feel the pain. What good is winning? Winning is no good."

He was right, of course, and he was wrong, too.

Cosmos was at the track everyday. He was the worst horseplayer I ever saw. Instinctively he landed upon the shortest-priced stiff, race after race. One day I pulled in close to $600. Steve asked for a $200 loan. I laid it on him.

I didn't see him the next day or the next. That Friday I couldn't make the races, had to have a wisdom-tooth extracted. The dentist gave me a bottle of painkilling pills.

"Only take these if you are in agony," he said.

The agony didn't arrive. I took a handful of the pills, drank a six-pack of beer and drove out to the night harness races.

I was standing in line and I looked over in the next line and there was a fellow who resembled Steve Cosmos, only he had a ragged-looking beard, really scraggly, and he was dressed in floppy, greasy clothing. Cosmos always dressed neatly and cleanly. I looked at the eyes of the fellow. The eyes looked faded. Not the right eyes. This guy was just a second-rate Cosmos. I looked away and forgot about it.

A couple of races later I was checking my program and the line of asses of the hookers along the bar when I felt a hand upon my wallet and I whirled and there was the second-rate Cosmos only it was the real one under all that, and he said, "Ank, I saw you looking at me . . ."

He pulled out two hundred-dollar bills and handed them to me.

"Now that I've reestablished my credit, you ought to be good for $400 next time."

"How'd you get lucky?" I asked.

"The woman I'm in love with—"

"Who's that?"

"The lady with the spinning head."

He meant the roulette wheel. (See: Las Vegas).

Things got bad down on Venice Beach. The screenplay kept crawling back kicked in the ass. The standard comment was, "Nobody is interested in the life of a barfly." They were right, of course. Even the barfly hardly cared.

People wanted a loser who became a winner. Or a winner who became a loser. But a loser who stayed a loser? That was too much like themselves. They weren't interested in themselves.

The fine motorcycles went first. Then Sasoon started renting out the rooms. But Sasoon was into leather and all that and he was often absentminded and sometimes he left one of the girls all bound up and gagged upon the fireplace (his sacrificial Altar of Doom) and with an icepick or pliers or a tong lying nearby, and this shocked some of the roomers who wandered about the place and they moved out. Worse, the hardy ones who remained stopped paying their rent. Next, the Mexican Specials went, and next, I heard Sasoon and Cosmos were gone, they were back in Paris. I got the postcard from Sasoon: ". . . going to try the screenplay on the French . . . Barbette has landed a leading role in major stage production . . . will send more news soon . . ."

And a line from Cosmos:

"Life is for nothing."

Three or four weeks later I got a letter from Sasoon who was in Paris:

"Hank,

They got Steve. He's in this ancient prison in Paris, one of the oldest around, a former torture chamber, full of rats. He's very depressed, very. He's gambled away much of his wine rations for the future. You should write him. What he did to get in there was so stupid he won't even tell me about it.

I'm still going around with your screenplay. There has been some interest but nothing definite. But this screenplay is going to make it someday, one way or another, I'll see to that.

Barbette sends her love to you and to Cristina, too.

Jean Sasoon"

Then I heard from Cosmos:

"Well, Ank, the police got me and it was so dumb the way I got caught that I'm ashamed to tell, and won't. My life is over. I will never get out of here. I think of you out there going to the track everyday and I only wish I were standing next to you tearing up my tickets. I will never see you again. Life is

ridiculous, it’s all a waste. There are a few fine fellows in here but there’s nothing we can do, or very little. Well, this is it for me. I never believed it would end like this. There are so many charges against me. I can’t believe I did all those things. My lawyer said for me to expect at least ten years, and if I do get ten, I’m lucky. You call that luck? My life is over. Even a butterfly is better off than I . . .

Write if possible.

Steve”

I wrote Cosmos right away. I wrote a long letter, and feeling that it might be read before it got to him, I wrote about how a man of his quality and character should never be in jail. I wrote that he should be honored, that what the world called justice was really a pathetic thing.

I went on and on in the letter, exclaiming what a noble man Cosmos was. I put it on so good that I almost wept.

It took me a bottle and a half of wine to write the letter, and when I reread it and sealed it up I felt that after reading all that they would let him out immediately . . .

Cosmos responded quickly:

“Say, Ank, that was a great letter and I read it over many times. You are right: I don’t belong in prison. However, it appears that only you and I believe this. I will never get out of here. This is it. Finis. *I might as well be buried alive. My life was good until now. Now I must pay. Well, all the women are yours, and all the horses, and all that good stuff you drink. Think of me sometimes living in this hole with the rats. Even the walls stink. This is my home now, forever, until . . . and then even when I’m dead they’ll throw me into some special prison for the dead, with dead rats and dead stinking walls . . . Even death will be for nothing.*

Steve”

I was having some trouble with the IRS, which I cleared up, then a chunk of something ripped open my gas tank as I got into a speed duel with some fool on the freeway, and then the freeway jammed and I had to go over the side, and it took three or four days to get that straightened out. Then I wrote

Cosmos again, trying to lend cheer. I even enclosed some francs I had left over from the trip over there. And then other standard little pitiable troubles followed, as they will, and I rather woke up one day to the fact that there had been no response to my last letter to Cosmos. Maybe I had said the wrong thing. Or having done a spot of time myself, I realized that some inmates thought those on the outside were out of touch with reality.

It wasn't so. My letter came back with an official stamp upon it in a dark smeared green. Again, forgive my French, but the stamp said something rather like: MOVED. ADDRESS UNKNOWN.

Great Christ, I thought, Cosmos has dug a hole through the side of one of those stinking walls. What a clever fellow. I was proud of him.

Then I got the facts from Sasoon:

". . . I don't know *how,* but somehow Steve made bail . . . it was quite some sum . . . Then he jumped bail . . . I don't know where he is. But, after this, if they ever catch him in France again he's got life for sure."

I rewrote the screenplay, this time calling it the "jazz-soup version." I mailed a copy to Sasoon. Now he could knock on the same doors all over again. Then I started getting obscene phone calls from teeny-boppers and had to get a new unlisted number. Unlisted numbers last as long as the average marriage: one and one-half years.

I got back into the poem. Tried some oil paintings but just ended up painting various versions of the human face, which is limited subject matter indeed. The horses ran all right but the horseplayers were a dreary group to take. They never admitted failure and kept right on failing. What was really bothering them was loneliness, and absence of brain cells. Sometimes out there I felt as if I were in a giant mental ward, I mean for the insane, you know, with all the doors open and nobody able to walk out. Including . . .

Anyhow, one day the phone rang and it was Sasoon.

"Allo, Hank, it's Sasoon."

"Where you at, Jean?"

"Venice."

"You mean the beach?"

"Well, not exactly. We're in the ghetto, we live in the black ghetto, nice place, big yard—"

"What are you doing there?"

“Well, we want to shoot a documentary of you, all right?”

“All right,” I said, feeling sorry for Jean because he had been unable to unload the screenplay.

“Guess who’s with me?”

“Barbette?”

“No, she’s working, they’re shooting something in Algier.”

“Who, then?”

There was another voice on the phone:

“I have no interest in the police, they only have an interest in me.”

“Cosmos—”

“Thanks for your letters, my friend. I will always value them.”

“When you guys coming to see me?”

“Oh, no, you come see *us! In the black ghetto!”*

“Must I?”

“You must.”

I got the instructions . . .

Although it was high noon I parked my car in a supermarket parking lot outside the ghetto and phoned in.

Sasoon tooled up in another Mexican Special. After exchanges I got in and we moved toward the ghetto.

“How do you like it?” Sasoon mentioned the car. “It’s fifteen years old and only got 20,000 miles on it. This housewife used to just drive it around for shopping, then her husband died and she had to sell it. I really got lucky! You like it?”

“Great, Jean, great.”

The exhaust left a gray-blue haze half a block behind us and the tired crankshaft pushed at the weary piston arms that were just aching to slice off and rocket through the hood.

“I got a deal,” said Jean Sasoon, sitting very straight and peering proudly over the long frontal hunk of that moving piece of shit. I inhaled a complete large can of Bud in three swallows so as not to have to answer to that.

We entered the ghetto. The streets were littered with bits of clothing and crap. Stockings. And shoes. But always *one* shoe. And never its mate. Which gave one the strange feeling that somebody had been amputated.

“Ah, look,” said Jean, “see that high rise?”

I saw it.

"The people got in there and then refused to pay rent. It took two years and the state troops to finally get them out of there. And before they did, those people ripped out all the toilets, all the wiring, all the pipes, everything, they kicked holes in the walls, set rooms on fire . . . Now it's all boarded up. And people still live there. We got people living under our house, we can hear them talking at night . . . They even have radios down there. Sometimes they have fights, we can hear them cursing . . ."

"Very interesting," I said.

"This is our place," said Jean, and he began to pull into the driveway into a parking area behind his building. Two young boys, black, about eight or nine years old, sat upon their bicycles and refused to budge. Jean slowly inched his car between them. With an artistic dexterity he pushed the large car between them. Suddenly one of the black boys turned his head and said: "*Hey, man, watch it!*"

Well, I thought, this is really living, and when the large troops come along our balls will be fried, sliced, diced and skewered. We parked, climbed out, went in.

There was Cosmos, sitting on the couch, large cheap jug of wine before him, he was trying to light a beer-soaked cigar. He looked up and saw me: "Ank, son of a bitch, what're you doing in black hell?" He was very drunk.

Sasoon showed me the place. It had two kitchens. And not much else. Except for a tremendous backyard full of weeds. We came back out and sat with Cosmos.

"Look, Ank," he said, "my life is finished. I end here."

"He's going to write me his life story," said Sasoon, "and I'm going to make a film out of it."

"Jean try to make me a writer. I'm no writer. Jean fuck me up good—"

"How's that, Steve?"

"Well, I am ten thousand ahead and then Jean says, 'Let's take a break.' And I say, 'How?' and he says, 'We'll go see Tom Jones.' So we go see Tom Jones. And he's got this big silver cross on and his shirt is open and the silver cross is mixed in with his stinking chest hair and he's dressed in tight-fitting leather and wearing a dildo and he sings his love songs and the women scream. We watch the whole Tom Jones show and then go back to the wheel and I can't go shit. Tom Jones has broken my rhythm. It's Jean's fault: that fuckin' Tom Jones!"

Cosmos lifts the entire jug of cheap wine and takes a tremendous hit.

Sasoon shows me his burglar alarm. It's a large cardboard box with little holes punched in the side. And in pencil, written in longhand: BURGLAR ALARM and also: TARANTULA! DO NOT OPEN!

Just think of that. And I had spend so much money on Westec Security.

We sat and drank awhile. Cosmos just went on and on about Tom Jones.

"What for, I need Tom Jones?"

"He cost me ten thousand!"

"Who is this Tom Jones? He looks like a fuckin' fool!"

Sasoon mentioned some of his ideas for the documentary and then I got out of there . . .

I saw Cosmos at the track the next day. He too had a Mexican Special.

"Jean has me on an allowance. This is my two-weeks allowance. I've got to win. He makes me write. He stands over me in this black shirt while I write. I'm like a slave. I must win!"

Then he put his head into the racing form. I told him I was going to get a coffee. I didn't want to spoil his concentration. I knew that he was going to buy a mass of daily-double tickets.

I met my friend the shrink who ran a nightclub and pushed drugs. He needed three jobs to support his horse habit.

"You need anything?" he asked. "I've got good stuff. Whatever you want, name it."

"Nothing right now, thanks."

I got down 20 win on a four-to-one short and the race was off. I came in a distant second and went over to where Cosmos was sitting. He showed me all his losing daily-double tickets. It was like seeing an old movie all over again.

Cosmos lost all day long.

"Well, there went my allowance," he said. "Maybe I can get a two-weeks advance."

It was very sad. I got him a drink at the bar.

He lifted his drink.

"Life is for nothing," he said.

I phoned Cosmos that night. Sasoon was off somewhere. There was an answering machine. Cosmos' voice was on it: "I AM NOT IN AND I WILL NEVER BE IN. YOU CAN LEAVE A MESSAGE BUT IT WON'T DO ANY GOOD. WHOEVER YOU ARE, I DON'T WANT TO SEE YOU OR HEAR WHAT YOU HAVE TO SAY. IF YOU WANT TO TALK TO SOMEBODY, TALK TO THIS MACHINE. I DON'T WANT TO TALK."

I waited for the beep.

"All right, machine, go suck yourself off—"

A voice broke in, "Oh, it's you, Ank—"

"You all right, Steve?"

"I drink the wine and feel the pain . . . When I come home there are two black guys in this house. They have a knife. 'Give us the money,' they say. 'What money?' I ask. "There's no money. I need *your* money!' I have this long stick, I hit them over the head with this stick. They run out of the house and I chase them with the stick! Jean is out somewhere fucking. He thinks that burglar alarm works. It's no good."

"You sure you're all right?"

"Yes, I drink the wine and feel the pain . . ."

I didn't see Steve at the track for a week or so. Good, I thought, he's busy writing his life's story.

Then I got a call from Jean.

"You should see this place now! Steve has planted a vegetable garden, built a barbecue and put a fireplace in the house!"

"A fireplace?"

"Yeah, we went out one night and stole some bricks."

"I'm sorry you can't get rid of my screenplay, Jean."

"Don't worry. We will. Why don't you come out? Steve is barbecuing some chicken—"

"Stolen?"

"Oh, no, we got a good buy. Come on out . . ."

It was a Sunday. A terrible day at the track, anyhow. Cristina and I drove out. When we got there everybody was on the red wine and Steve was quite drunk. There were eight or 10 people there. I didn't know who they were. There were no introductions. But they were all into film and they were all

Europeans. Which, of course, beats people being into film and being Americans.

Steve had burnt the chicken. It was black and hard on the outside and the insides were raw. And the salad was demented. Stacks of paper plates were everywhere but nobody had eaten, although some had tried. Cosmos just sat and smiled. He had on a chef's hat but there was a smear of dirt halfway up. The eight or 10 people were broken up into groups and didn't seem to like each other.

"Look what Steve did!" Jean waved his arm.

And it was quite a sight. It was obvious that things had been planted. There were paths and designs. It was marvelously done. Poor Steve had busted his ass. And there were chickens and ducks running about the yard.

"We will have our own heggs," said Cosmos. Then he gulped off his paper cup of wine.

"Come and see the fireplace," said Jean.

Cristina and I went in with Jean and there it was. Quite professionally done. Cosmos could do all these things. Spoke many languages. And the garden too had been very professional, very artistic. Steve had taken husbandry or whatever the hell you call it at the university.

We went back in the yard and began on the red wine. Over the fence little black faces watched. Steve threw them pieces of black chicken. Cosmos and Sasoon had settled into the ghetto . . .

The next time I saw Cosmos I was at the night harness races. He had a big handful of money, fifties and hundreds, and he was with a couple of women and a guy. The guy seemed very intelligent, well balanced. Jean was to tell me later that he was from the French Mafia. They gave Steve money whenever he asked for it. One time Steve had done time rather than reveal something he knew about them, which would have gotten him off.

Steve rushed off to bet and the Mafia guy said to me, "He's crazy."

"I never thought about it that way," I told him.

Steve did hit one exacta that night so he only dropped a couple hundred. I saw the Mafia guy hand him some money for the last race.

I made $68 and drove back on in.

The documentary didn't interest me too much. Jean had picked up a soundman and a cameraman and I got drunk and answered his questions. It was strange when I saw the playbacks, though—I said many odd things, I had no idea that all these things were crawling in my brain. Well, all right.

But Jean said it would take some weeks. But when you're drinking, it's not really work. That's the way I write. But this is supposedly about my friend the gambler, so let me say he had to go to Vegas with a buddy and they were going to rip off the wheel up there. One of Steve's main problems was that he won it crooked and then he'd lose it back honest.

So Cosmos was gone, and then Sasoon had to make a run to Paris and so the house in the ghetto was empty, and an arrangement had been made with a neighbor to feed the chickens and the ducks.

It was strange to me that I had gotten so involved with these two Frenchmen, and me being of German extraction, even having been born there. But they didn't feel like the enemy to me. I could never have dealt with Americans the same way, I just didn't like them. The only good American guys are in the madhouses and jails, and the women are very hostile and obvious. Well, so, anyhow....

I was at the track and I looked up and there's Cosmos.

"Ank," he said, "I got back, went to the place, and it's locked tight. I don't have a key, I don't know what I did with my key. I got to wait for Jean to get back. What'll I do?"

"There's my place. I have an extra bedroom."

"I'll pay you," he said, "look . . ."

He showed me his wallet. It was so full of hundreds that he could hardly fold it to get it into his pocket.

"No money," I said.

"All right," he said, "we'll do it this way. Whoever wins at the track each day buys the meals and drinks."

"Suppose we both lose?" I asked.

"Are we that bad?"

"Some of us are."

So I drove out to the track each day with a companion. He was still the worst horseplayer I had ever met. He managed to fall upon the worst short-priced horse race after race. And his horses didn't even run. They just wearily trailed the field each race at prices like 5/2, 6/5, 3 to one, 7 to 2. How he could keep doing this so consistently I had no idea. But he did.

I took him to various places for dinner.

Once he complained, “This place is not as nice as some of those other places we’ve been.”

“Maybe not,” I answered, “but just this once, force the food and drink down somehow . . .”

Cosmos liked a couple of drinks before and a couple after dinner.

Afterwards we’d go back to my place and I’d open the wine and we’d sit there and then he’d want to watch the TV. So we drank and watched TV. Since he was the guest I let him select the programs. He liked the situation comedies with laugh tracks, the family, middle-class bits. Total nightmares of stupidity. You could guess each new line before it arrived. Steve laughed often: “Oh, this is very funny!”

I put it down as a difference in cultures.

Meanwhile, Cosmos could easily fold his wallet. The hundreds had gotten down to where he could glance at them in a moment.

“You ought to stick to roulette,” I told him.

“It doesn’t matter,” Cosmos had said, “money is for nothing.”

“Yeah,” I had said, laying out my American Express card to the waiter.

Yes, I know I’m taking too long to tell this, but I want you to get the full flavor, whether it matters or not. It really means something but what it means I’m not sure. What are you doing now, anyhow? Just resting or hiding. Rest and hide within this crap . . .

Sasoon came back and rescued me, I got the call about noon, it was a Monday and nothing was running.

“They stole all the ducks and chickens, they broke in here and got all the food and the wine and all our clothes. They took everything but the typewriter. I don’t think they knew what it was.”

“Jeez, that’s rough . . . Steve’s been staying with me. He lost the key to your place.”

“Hell, *they* didn’t need a key! Has Steve been working on his life story?”

“Mostly, I guess, he’s been living it.”

“Could you put him on the phone?”

They spoke in rapid French. Cosmos waved his free arm. His pink face became red. They yelled at each other for five or six minutes. Then Steve hung up.

"He's like a father! He wants me to write! I'm no writer! He's going to stand behind me! Can you write with somebody standing behind you?"

"Not unless it's death."

"It's terrible with him! Each day he asks me, 'How many pages did you write?'"

"Writing's like fucking," I told him, "you have to want to do it and then sometimes you fail."

"I don't even want to fuck. Afterwards you have a woman around. What do you do with her? I jack-off! I jack-off to the walls!"

"Well, anyhow, Steve, father wants you back."

"You got any more beer?"

"Sure."

Cosmos drank four bottles of beer, got into his Mexican Special, backed out the drive and was gone. A lucky day for me: two writers in one house were one too many.

Now I could get something done. I took out a coin. Heads I jacked-off, tails I wrote.

I flipped the coin. I landed tails.

I walked in toward the typewriter.

Well, you couldn't have *all* your luck in one day.

Somehow Jean got Steve to writing. I didn't see him at the track anymore. Jean came over with the cameras and the sound equipment one day and we wrapped up the documentary. We drank beer and wine and sat outside and I said things. Responded mainly to questions. My 12 years in the post office, jive-assing with the blacks had taught me how to bullshit my way through. The neighborhood children tossed rocks at us. Some of their parents had informed them that I was an evil man. I drank and wrote dirty stories and lived with women half my age. Why should that bother them?

Afterwards, as the rocks got larger, we went inside. Sasoon showed me some of the pages Cosmos had written. They were quite good. Not the writing but the content. Lively and full of madness. And it was written in English. I had no idea why and didn't ask.

"You've got some good crap here," I told Cosmos.

He really liked that. He showed it.

"Thank you, my friend."

"Good writers watch other people live," I told him. "Great writers live and watch other people live."

"What do bad writers do?"

"Make money."

We drank a bit more and then everybody left. Well, not everybody. I was still there. I was a good writer, a great writer and a bad writer. And pretty fair with the horses.

Let's get rolling: some months went by. Sometimes I saw Cosmos at the track. Sometimes not. He was going through a series of girlfriends. I met some of them. Seemed nice. They all had good jobs, it seemed. But he borrowed money from them, lost it at the track, couldn't pay it back. The girls dropped away. Cosmos put an ad in the paper stating that he wanted to marry a woman with at least five children. He got many reponses and interviewed a great many women. He couldn't find the right one.

"They were all too fat," he told me.

"Why do you want a woman with so many children?"

"It's when you lose after gambling. You've got something to come home to."

"When I lose, all I want to see is a bottle, I don't want anybody around," I told him.

"No, it's nice to have somebody to come home to who doesn't treat you like a loser."

"They will after canned beans and peanut-butter sandwiches."

Cosmos finished his life story. They brought it over to me. I read it. It was very interesting. But a total maze. It needed *work*. They asked me if I might. I told them I couldn't. I was in my own maze.

It was all right. They got some guy. A scriptwriter, temporarily down. Leland LaCrosse. LaCrosse came over and we got totally drunk. LaCrosse claimed Copalla had fucked him over. Copalla owed him money. He was going to sue Copalla. LaCrosse was a very depressed person. He talked about Schopenhauer, he loved Schopenhauer. LaCrosse talked about suicide. He discussed suicide at some length. He talked sense, he was intelligent, but he was bogged down in self-pity. Depressed men seldom crashed through. Sometimes disgusted men did because when you're disgusted it elevates the frame of battle to some logical confrontation. Anyhow, LaCrosse agreed to straighten out the Cosmos script. I liked that: reworking Steve's script would have depressed me.

LaCrosse phoned me one night.

"I'm going to kill myself," he said. "I'm going to cut my wrists."

"That's very painful," I said. "As the blood runs out there will be spasms and contractions. To avoid this get into a tub of very warm water first and after you slice your wrists, hold them under water and stay that way with your body immersed. You'll find it almost painless."

LaCrosse hung up on me.

Evidently he didn't do it. The script got reworked.

Sasoon phoned.

"I'm going to Paris. I'm going to set this thing up. We're going to shoot on a very limited budget. As soon as I'm ready I'm going to send Steve an airline ticket. Meanwhile, he's on his allowance. Keep an eye on him."

"Sure, Jean . . ."

Things got lined up and Sasoon sent Cosmos the money for an airline ticket. Cosmos took the money and went down and purchased the ticket. He was to get a bit part in his own movie. It was to be shot in a famous casino where Steve was not yet in trouble. And best, it wasn't in France. Just near France.

Steve phoned. "You know," he said, "you always said I could stay for a week or two—"

"Yes," I said, thinking, *but you already have*.

"I've got to close this place down and then wait to fly over. I don't want to go now. Jean will put me to work doing some asshole thing. I don't want to go until they're ready to shoot. So—"

"All right," I sighed, "it's all right, Steve."

So again I had a companion with me at the track everyday.

"I have my allowance," he told me.

"Good," I said.

"Whoever wins," he said, "buys the dinner."

"Right."

First time out, he finally won. I got a dinner.

The next time, it wasn’t so. Or the time after that. Or the time after that. Or the time . . .

“I don’t care if I win or lose,” he told me, “I just want to gamble.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I can only talk to a gambler,” he told me. “Nobody else knows anything.”

“Yeah,” I said.

Seven or eight days went by.

“If Jean calls tell him I’m not here. Tell him you think I took the plane.”

“Aren’t you going to?”

“The other day when I told you I was going to visit LaCrosse, I didn’t. I went to the airport and cashed in the plane ticket.”

“I wondered where you got the new money.”

“Tomorrow I will hit it big,” he said.

Then he told me that some day he was going to live in a castle with a woman with many children. He would grow his own food. He would have hunting dogs and stock fine wines.

“Do you have any of the plane-ticket money left?”

“Very little. But I feel I’m due for a big hit tomorrow.

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. Each tomorrow was the same. Finally, he tapped out. He was standing next to me and he said, “My horse got left at the gate. That’s it. I’m broke.”

We walked over to the bar and I bought him a drink. You hated to lend a sum of money to a bad gambler; horses just weren’t his horsemeat. It was the last race and I handed him a 20 and suggested he consider Night Fire, who was reading five to one. After I spoke, I knew I had said the wrong thing: I had talked him off of a possible winner. He went for a $20 exacta, Slim Bim to Night Fire. Of course they came in in reverse.

As we drove toward his favorite eating place, I thought, son of a bitch, this fellow may be living with me for the rest of my life. He’s a fine sort. Inventive. Original in his way. Quite aware of death. Well-lived. He got a little loud and stupid when drunk but we all did. But to live a lifetime? With this buddy? I was used to solitude. Even when I had been a bum I had avoided the missions, preferred the park bench, the alley, anywhere but being with the mob. Being alone was all I had going for me when things got very ugly, it was the only thing which healed me.

Frankly, I was terrified.

"Life is for nothing," he said as we drove along . . .

We had our two opening rounds of drinks at the table and Steve loosened his charm upon the waitress. I was downcast and ordered as if I were the loser. Then I ordered another round of drinks.

Steve looked at me.

"Gamblers understand," he said.

"What do they understand?"

"Everything . . ."

That night at the place, I poured the wine heavily. Steve took out an expensive cigar and lit up.

"I'm all right," he said, "as long as I don't run out of these I'm all right. As long as I have my cigar I will make it."

"How they holding out?"

"Ho! I have *many* yet!"

Steve Cosmos was a class act.

The next day, after breakfast, he asked, "You going to the track today?"

"Yes," I said. "Listen, Steve, how'd you like to *earn* some money?"

"*Earn?*"

I took him out to the parkway in front of the house.

"Look at those weeds."

"I see them, ugly things."

"Yes, you're a landscape artist. Do you have some method of getting them of there?"

"Well—"

"Fifteen dollars an hour—"

"Eighteen—"

"You're on . . ."

I really felt terrible as I pulled out the drive that morning about Steve. I felt like a hunk of shit. I felt like a man acting in bad style. I probably was.

I waved to him and drove off to the track.

As I looked in the rearview mirror he was leaning upon the hoe, contemplating . . .

I had gotten a cable from Sasoon:

"Where's Steve? Phoned the place, no answer. Phoned your place, you do not answer. Ready to begin shooting film. Sent money for air ticket to Steve.

Urgent he get here. Reply.

Jean"

It looked like a good card out there. Small fields. I liked small fields. But it wasn't any good: I lost.

When I got back in, Cosmos was well into a beer-drunk. I had a closet full of Budweiser.

He looked up from his cigar.

"I got the weeds. Come, I show you."

We walked out front. He had done quite well.

"There will be no weeds for a year now. You will see."

But he had left one little square of weeds, neatly blocked off, a square of about two feet by four.

"This still needs to be done."

Steve knew as I did, that if we didn't get those out of there all the other work was wasted.

I gave him $140.

Then we went out to dinner.

Need I tell you? We lost it out there the next day. We stopped for a new case of wine on the way in and popped it open upon arrival at the place. We shared a bottle, went out to eat. We tried a new place. The waiter went off for our drinks. The place had piped-in music. When the waiter came back with our libations, Cosmos spoke to him.

"I insist you either get better music in here or shut it off!"

Steve had upbringing. I had come from a lower-middle-class family.

"Steve, do you want to get that plot of weeds tomorrow?"

"If you insist."

"It's up to you."

"It might take some time. The roots are deeply imbedded."

"I'm sure they are."

"Eighteen an hour?"

"Raise you two," I said.

"I'll call . . ."

As the days went on Steve switched to the inner garden. I played the horses in the day and he played them at night. We had some drinks when he came in. Our new pattern was established. When he finished the garden I’d have him paint the house.

I cabled Sasoon to go ahead and shoot the parts without Cosmos.

Then one night Cosmos didn’t return from the harness races. I drank a couple of bottles of wine, wrote four bad poems and two good ones. It was just like old times. I figured Steve was laying up with some new girl. I was glad for him.

About 10 A.M. I came down the stairway for something for my hangover and noticed that the guest bedroom door was open. Cosmos had neatly made the bed and upon it was a note: *“Ank,*

I hit a big exacta last night. Know a guy who wants to buy my car. Am flying over to movie location. I have money for the ticket. I will now be a great movie star. Thanks for letting me stay at your place and for all the good wine.

Steve.”

The note made me feel ashamed. I had been so cheap. Steve had pulled it out. I was not very much. I had some way to go. Growing was difficult, I did it so slowly and the years were running out.

How do you say it? Some weeks went by. Then there was a letter from Sasoon: *“Dear Hank:*

Steve arrived. His part in the movie is to be the director of the casino. We shoot in the daytime. Then at night when the casino opens Steve still thinks he’s the director at the casino. He cheats openly at the tables and demands his money. Since we use the casino employees in the movie during the day there is some confusion. Also, since he is not a writer and *an actor he has met some of the people and borrowed money from them. You* know *what that means. He gave one man a very large check in exchange for funds. The check bounced, came back. The man showed it to Steve and Steve insisted that there must be some mistake, he’s going to check with his bank, it’s impossible that the check is no good . . .*

Everything else is a mess, too. We are running out of funds. At first we hired the regular people who played the casino at night to act in our movie *during the day. Now we must pick up the bums from the street and dress them in proper clothing, which we rent, but it's cheaper that way—and they look just the same as the regular people.*

Also, the wife of the biggest producer backing this movie has fallen in love with Steve. She threatens to leave the producer for Steve, and since the producer doesn't want to lose her, they all rather live together, eat together, all that. She is a beautiful and intelligent woman. They go to the gaming tables together and Steve is totally insane, grabbing chips, spilling drinks over himself, shouting passages from Schopenhauer, vomiting upon ladies' dresses, exclaiming that Death is Everywhere, that it is crawling through his intestines like shit, that everything is shit. He is now the brilliant writer-actor. He has been interviewed for several journals but insists that they don't take his photograph, says a camera would destroy his soul, most likely means his ass . . .

Will let you know as more unfolds.

Best,
Jean"

All right, skip two months. Like that. Did you do it? Fine.

There's another letter from Sasoon. He's in Paris.

"Dear Hank:

We finished the movie. Much trouble with shooting Steve. I'd tell him to talk there, say this, then he'd do something else. It kept on and on. It was terrible. But we finished. And since Barbette played the female lead we were all right there. Now editing the film. Steve stayed to be with the producer's wife.

Good luck with your documentary. A major TV station bought it. They are going to show it on prime time. Every night. But they want it broken up into segments of six minutes or less. Much work to be done there but we have fourteen hours of you and ought to get some good segments out of it.

With Steve things are not going as well with the producer's wife as before. She stays with the producer at night in the villa and meets Steve secretly during the day. Steve has borrowed too much money from her which he can't repay. And he has been barred from the casino. I send him bits of money when I can.

He writes me, 'Since I have become a writer and an actor I am more broke than I have ever been. I have holes in the bottoms of my shoes and I sleep with the bums at night on the park benches. I know each of them by name. When it rains we try to hang out in the train station but the police run us off. I am at the absolute bottom, completely dissolute and destitute, and as full of despair, I guess, as a man can get. I am too spiritually weak and inept to even kill myself. If I killed myself where would they put me? Just on another park bench in hell . . . There is no escape from anything. I don't even have the ability to go mad.'"

Poor Steve. I had never gotten the story quite straight because I had heard it from both Steve and Jean, and both times during heavy drinking, but it translates something like this: As a young man Steve Cosmos had entered a casino with a small sum of money and he had no idea how the game worked. He had walked up to the wheel and placed a wager. He won. He just left the money there. And won again and again. I mean, he left the chips there, you know. He still left them there when he went to the men's room, and when he came back he had won an enormous sum: $19,000. Does this seem possible? Or maybe I don't have it quite right. I remember the sum, though: $19,000. Cosmos went to the cage to collect and they asked him if he wanted a check or cash. He took the cash.

There was a very handsome woman about that night and Steve mentioned to somebody that he wanted that woman. That somebody told him that that was impossible, that that simply was not that kind of woman. He told this somebody that he would give this woman $2,000 for her favors. They went up to a room in the casino and that was that. Steve was hooked. He hung around casinos. He met some con artists. They went from casino to casino doing their tricks. Cosmos told me many of them which I don't have the freedom to divulge here. Except one. They had an electronically controlled roulette ball which they could make drop into any number. The button was operated from a fake package of cigarettes. All they had to do was switch balls, which was easy enough to do with a screen of distraction and fast hands. The ball was very delicate, however, and one night during a good run it exploded. They left their winnings there for a quick exit.

The gang went from city to city around the world. They became known and had to wear disguises. At times they got enough money, wearied of it, split, only to meet and start up again.

In between times, my friend Steve learned other tricks. Besides passing bad checks with fake I.D.'s, he had a little camera, and with this little camera he walked up to expensive cars, put the little camera against the door lock and snapped the shutter. When the film was developed it showed the inside grooves of the lock. A key was made from this. Then Cosmos would go back to the car, open the door, jump-start the car and drive it off. He stole a great many cars this way. A steering-wheel lock meant nothing: he could break one down on an average of one minute and 15 seconds.

And he lived for free in the finest of hotels. He ran up huge sums and merely walked out, leaving an empty suitcase in the room with a note: "Thank you so much for everything."

A man like that could never consider an eight-hour job.

And there I had had him pulling weeds out of my garden . . .

And there was no way I could ever write about him because then the law would have me for harboring a criminal and the French Mafia would be after my ass, but I sat around thinking about the whole thing. I could present it as a work of fiction and then in the fiction I could say it was real. It was too long for a short story and not long enough for a novel. Well, shit.

I had just finished my fourth novel and my favorite cat had died, a real tough son of a bitch, and Cristina and I were having our problems, but the racetrack was still there. I really loved that place, all those places, Anita, Hollywood Park, Los Alamitos. Del Mar and Pomona you could have. But the track was the best shrink I could ever have. It taught me about myself, the others, everything. It was the open lesson of balance and chance, it was a flash of lighting and it was the durability of the gods. It was the place for me.

I drove into valet and the guy who handed me the yellow stub said, "You been sick, champ?"

And I said, "No, what makes you ask?"

"Didn't see you yesterday," he said.

"How's your wife and family?" I asked.

"Fine," he said.

"That's great," I said.

I walked on in and checked the program. Lots of maiden races. Good. My favorite play. Very little public information. But I had a method of detecting where my solid money was going.

By the fourth race I was $225 ahead, sitting there, checking my program against the racing form and the board action when I sensed somebody sitting behind me. I could feel him there, looking over my shoulder. I didn’t like anybody near me. I moved on down. I felt this same figure following me, sitting down behind me again. I am one who is not too fond of humanity, even those who we are told are great, even those sicken me, so, you see, I didn’t like anybody around, so I turned and I said, “Hey, look, you son of a bitch—”

And, you guessed it, it was Steve Cosmos.

“Ank—” he said.

“Well, baby,” I said, “all I can let you have is a twenty—”

“Don’t worry, my friend,” he said. He pulled out a huge roll of money, very green, very fat, very legal.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I could ask you the same. How about a drink?”

“Fine.”

We walked up to the bar. Steve had a double whiskey and water. I ordered a vodka tonic.

“Who do you like in this race?” he asked.

“Well, if the board doesn’t change too much I like Blue Fire.”

“Far Dream will win,” he said.

“You ought to lay off those big closers,” I said. “I keep telling you that over and over but you won’t listen.”

“Far Dream will win. There will be a fast pace.”

“The old textbook approach. The game is different now. Nowadays the speed of the speed usually wins.”

“Winner buys dinner?” Cosmos asked.

“Winner buys dinner,” I said.

We raised our drinks, clicked them, drained them off.

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AFTERWORD

by David Stephen Calonne

Nineteen sixty-nine was Charles Bukowski's *annus mirabilis*: *Penguin Modern Poets 13* (Bukowski, Lamantia, Norse), a volume in the distinguished British series devoted to contemporary poets edited by Nikos Stangos in London, *A Bukowski Sampler*, and *The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over the Hills* were published. And, perhaps most significantly for his transformation from a largely unknown "underground" writer to a literary figure with an international reputation, *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* appeared on January 24, 1969, from Essex House, a small North Hollywood publisher specializing in erotica, in an edition of approximately 28,000 copies.[1] The genesis of the book was aided by the efforts of an indefatigable editor named John Bryan. Bukowski had appeared previously in several Bryan publications: as early as July 1961 in *Renaissance*, with his poem "The Way to Review a Play"; in 1962, again in *Renaissance*, with his essay "Peace, Baby, Is Hard Sell"; and in 1964, in the magazine *Notes from Underground*, with his story "A Murder." In San Francisco in November 1964, Bryan started *Open City*, then known as *San Francisco Open City Press*, which continued for fifteen issues. Bukowski's brief story "If I Could Only Be Asleep" appeared in the January 1966 issue.[2] Bryan had been in San Francisco when the owner of the *Los Angeles Free Press* asked him to move to Los Angeles to help with the newly inaugurated newspaper: he became managing editor and was responsible for significantly increasing its circulation.

Then in 1967, Bryan decided to start his own newspaper in Los Angeles—*Open City*—and asked Bukowski to contribute, agreeing to pay him $10 a week. Bukowski claims in his autobiographical essay "Dirty Old Man Confesses" that it was he who invented the title (echoing one of his favorite books, Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*): "one day John Bryan decided to start an Underground newspaper called *Open City*. I was asked to contribute a column a week. I called the column 'Notes of A Dirty Old

Man.'"[3] The debut installment appeared in the May 12–18, 1967, issue.[4] Bryan would publish 93 issues, ending in March 1969, with Bukowski appearing in 89 of them.[5] In his Foreword to *Notes of A Dirty Old Man*, Bukowski described the ease and pleasure of his new assignment:

> Then one day after the races, I sat down and wrote the heading, NOTES OF A DIRTY OLD MAN, opened a beer, and the writing got done by itself. There was not the tenseness or the careful carving with a bit of a dull blade, that was needed to write something for the *Atlantic Monthly*.... There seemed to be no pressures. Just sit by the window, lift the beer and let it come. Anything that wanted to arrive, arrived.[6]

Bukowski went on to describe the *Sturm und Drang* involved with writing and publishing poetry—sometimes he would wait two to five years to see a poem in print after it was accepted—but "with NOTES, sit down with a beer and hit the typer on a Friday or a Saturday or a Sunday and by Wednesday the thing is all over the city."[7]

Bukowski was thrilled by the birth of his first volume of prose and dashed off a happy self-review for *Open City*:

> How many times can a man go through the thresher and still keep his blood, the Summer sun inside his head? How many bad jails, how many bad women, how many sundry cancers, how many flat tires, how many this or that or what or what or what? . . .
>
> Frankly I read my own stories in easy wonderment, forgetting who I was, almost almost, and I thought: Ummm, ummm, this son of a bitch can really write.[8]

The offer from Bryan actually came just at the right time, because Bukowski had already been composing prose for the past few years. In 1965, Douglas Blazek published *Confessions of a Man Insane Enough to Live with Beasts*—a story in nine sections dealing with Bukowski's life from childhood through his marriage to and divorce from Barbara Frye—and in the following year *All the Assholes in the World and Mine*, a hilarious account of his hemorrhoid operation. Now he had contracted to produce a weekly column: the discipline of the deadline opened the creative floodgates. *Open City*, and subsequently *NOLA Express* and the *Los Angeles Free Press*, gave Bukowski the opportunity to mine his past experiences and to try out various treatments of material which he would later transform in his novels *Post Office*, *Factotum*, *Women*, and *Ham on Rye*.

Notes of A Dirty Old Man was reprinted in 1973 by City Lights and since then has been continuously in print. The series became a forum where Bukowski presented stories, essays, poems, interviews, even several cartoons (now more elegantly christened "graphic fiction"). However, the original book contained only forty of the hundreds of works he submitted under the "Dirty Old Man" rubric: other columns would later be collected in *Erections, Ejaculations and Other Tales of Ordinary Madness* (1972), *South of No North* (1974), and *Hot Water Music* (1983), as well as in the posthumous volumes *Portions from a Wine-Stained Notebook* (2008) and *Absence of the Hero* (2010). *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* met with international success: Bukowski had broken through into new territory in American literature. He was a strange, compelling creature: a "drop out" from the mainstream, a "working-class" artist in love with "high culture"—Beethoven, Mahler, Sibelius, Stravinsky, Catullus, Li Po, Céline, and Dostoyevsky—and composing a hip, direct, swiftly moving prose, a new American argot: "vulgarity" punctuated by sudden, exquisite flights of lyrical sensitivity.[9]

Bukowski first read Dostoyevsky in the early forties in the El Paso Public Library.[10] And on the opening page of *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*, the narrator tells us that he was "a student of Dostoevski and listened to Mahler in the dark."[11] Like Dostoyevsky's character in *Notes from Underground*, many of Bukowski's Dionysian poets, dreamers, and misfits are half-mad, angry, impetuous, inspired, ecstatic. The title precisely describes Bukowski's aim: he combines Dostoyevskian "notes" with the American slang expression "dirty old man," thus mixing the Eastern European tradition of dark psyches at war with themselves and others with a cool, subversive American style informed by all the countercultural themes and obsessions of the sixties and seventies.

For example, in the story depicting his trip to New Orleans, his wit and verve can be seen in the abrupt, telegraphic opening: "Going east. In the barcar. They had sent me money for the barcar. Of course, I had a pint getting on and had stopped for a pint at El Paso. I was the world's greatest poet and he was the world's greatest editor and bookmaker (and I'm not talking about horses)." The repetition of the primarily mono-and disyllabic words—"barcar," "pint," "greatest poet," "greatest editor"—and stop-and-go syntax mirror the sound of the chugging and clattering train as it sets out on its journey. The narrative then grows organically, one element of plot added to another in a natural, effortless way. This skill was the product of years of labor, although what was new in Bukowski's style of the sixties was this rapid movement of a shrewd, tough intelligence under the influence of the new, heady, casual openness of the Age of Aquarius.

The compulsive eroticism of the series was at once a clever way to attract attention to his writing (as well as to sell newspapers) and an exploration of sex and love as the ultimate arena in which the frequently comic struggle for selfhood takes place. Bukowski often sees the sexual drama as an insane farce:

> So, to some writers, including the gloriously impertinent Bukowski, sex is obviously the tragicomedy. I don't write about it as an instrument of obsession. I write about it as a stage play laugh where you have to cry about it, a bit, between acts. Giovanni Boccaccio wrote it much better. He had the distance and the style. I am still too near the target to effect total grace. People simply think I'm dirty. If you haven't read Boccaccio, do. You might begin with *The Decameron*.[12]

Interestingly, Pasolini's film version of *The Decameron* (1970) appeared the year following the publication of *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*, and Boccaccio (1313–1375) served as Bukowski's thematic and structural model for his novel *Women*: *The Decameron* has 101 chapters, *Women*, 104. The other great Italian (Roman) writer to whom Bukowski was most devoted was Gaius Valerius Catullus (ca. 84–54 B.C.), to whom he wrote several homages, including the humorous poem "what have I seen" in which he imagines seeing Catullus at the race track bar in the company of a lady of questionable virtue: "I like your way, Catullus, talking plainly about the / whore who claims you owe her money, or about / that guy who smiled too much—who cleaned / his teeth with horse piss, / or about how the young poets / come with their blameless tame verse, or about / how this or that guy married a slut.”[13] Although he played brilliantly the role of an anti-intellectual primitive, Bukowski would bring his considerable knowledge of world literature to bear in his portrayal of the human sexual comedy.

Bukowski explores a good deal of taboo territory, every form of sexual expression, “perversion,” or “deviancy.” We are introduced to a gallery of characters worthy of Wilhelm Stekel, or Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Although he surely did not intend in a conscious way to present such an encyclopedic summary of paraphiliae, “Notes of a Dirty Old Man,” over the course of the column’s lengthy run, would provide portrayals of child rape, castration, anal intercourse, three females picking up and ravishing a man, intercourse with a high-heeled shoe, voyeurism, bestiality, sexual role playing (in which a man is treated as a child by a middle-aged woman), fetishism, onanism, necrophilia, and violent sadism. Surely part of the success of the series was due to the fact that Bukowski said things that many people would have liked to say but lacked the courage to express. He took the lid off the id; he is “unrepressed” in his insistent uncovering of the submerged activity of the libido in the unconscious.

As Michel Foucault asserts in *The History of Sexuality*:

> The legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality, had a right to more discretion. It tended to function as a norm, one that was stricter, but quieter. On the other hand, what came under scrutiny was the sexuality of children, mad men and women, and criminals; the sensuality of those who did not like the opposite sex; reveries, obsessions, petty manias, of great transports of rage. It was time for all these figures, scarcely noticed in the past, to step forward and speak, to make the difficult confession of what they were. No doubt they were condemned all the same; but they were listened to; and if regular sexuality happened to be questioned once again, it was through a reflux movement, originating in these peripheral sexualities.[14]

Bukowski provides an often humorous opportunity—as if to lessen the pain of the revelation—for these various characters to make a “confession of what they were.” And even “the legitimate couple”—in, for example, the story of the couple in bed in which the wife is dreaming of intercourse with another man and the husband confesses to incestuous longings—is exposed in Bukowski as harboring dark secrets lurking beneath the surface of conscious awareness.

Yet Bukowski, like D.H. Lawrence, sought a more natural expression of sexuality which was constantly frustrated by our alienating, cold, technocratic society. He writes in his *NOLA* essay of December 31, 1971–January 13, 1972 about

> all these people, the love-lost, the sex-lost, the suicide-driven . . . somewhere in the structure of our society it is impossible for these people to contact each other. Churches, dances, parties only seem to push them further apart, and the dating clubs, the Computer Love Machines only destroy more and more a naturalness that should have been: a naturalness that has somehow been crushed and seems to remain crushed forever in our present method of living (dying). See them put on their bright clothes and get into their new cars and roar off to NOWHERE. It's all an outside maneuver and the contact is missed.

It is possible to read Bukowski's elaboration of all the varieties of sexual behavior as a kind of diagnosis of the ills of our culture, of the ways this "naturalness" has been subverted. The inhibition of this need to make "contact" with one another is precisely what has led to the frequently frenetic efforts of the caged human animal to break out of its traps in whatever ways it can devise—even if this means amputating parts of itself as it attempts to break free from the manacles.

Bukowski's column would also appear in *NOLA Express* edited by Darlene Fife and her husband Robert Head. Fife explains in her memoir *Portraits from Memory: New Orleans in the Sixties* that her husband

> had read Bukowski in one of the mimeo mags and wrote asking him for submissions. We published him from late '68 [the first "Dirty Old Man" column was actually August 15–28, 1969] to the end of *Nola Express* in January, 1974. He sent us poems or, most often short stories every two weeks; always clean copy, always on time. He took his responsibilities to his editors seriously. His writings elicited more letters to the editor both for and against than any other. Bukowski occasionally responded to the letters with his own letter to the editor. We paid him $25 for each published piece. As little as this is,

> Bukowski told us it was this money that gave him the courage to quit his job in the post office.[15]

Bukowski never met the couple and they spoke only once by phone, but he sent a letter of support when *NOLA* encountered censorship difficulties: it appeared in issue #53 of April, 1970 in the typical, mainly lower-case style he favored during this period:

> you are the liveliest thing happening in the U.S. right now. you've always layed your guts right on the line without laying on this juvenile hippy Romanticism which destroys papers like the *Berkeley Tribe*. don't put me down as anti-hip or yip or whatever, but somehow building those paper heroes has destroyed the force of what really needs to be said. each issue of NOLA is a thing I read over and over. it's magic . . . Wrote *Evergreen* about you people, hoping they can break the back of whatever is trying to break you. your courage is the quietest poem of all. you make me feel good when very few things do.[16]

By this time, Bukowski had experienced difficulties of his own with the "authorities": in 1968 the FBI began to investigate him. He would eventually leave the Post Office—not only because John Martin offered him a monthly stipend to quit and write full time, but most likely because he was about to be dismissed, not for supposed "absenteeism" but due to his work for *Open City*, a clear violation of his right to free speech. Bukowski's FBI file also indicates that they began to investigate his "common law wife"—this was clearly Frances Smith, although her name has been redacted from the file—who "has been reported to have attended a number of Communist Party meetings in the Los Angeles area." The file indicates "that one Charles Bukowski, poet, was the author of an article appearing on page 43 of the June, 1963, issue of 'Mainstream.'" This essay, which Bukowski had submitted about the "little magazines," contained some X-ed out language which the editor, Felix Singer, saw fit to censor. The report continues:

> The March, (1968) edition of the "Underground Digest, The Best of the Underground Press," Volume I, published by the Underground Communications, Inc., P.O. Box 211, Village Station, New York, New

> York 10014, telephone WI 7-6900, contains an article by Charles Bukowski on pages 76-79 entitled “Notes of a Dirty Old Man.” Page 79 indicates that the writer’s name may be Henry Charles Bukowski. The publication indicates at the end of the article on page 79 that the article may have originally appeared in “Open City” 5420 Carlton Way, Los Angeles, California 90027; $5 per year. Single copies of the article “Notes of a Dirty Old Man” together with a copy of the masthead of the Underground Digest are enclosed for New York and Los Angeles under obscene cover.
>
> New York and Los Angeles should make discreet efforts to resolve whether this article and the item appearing in the June, 1963, issue of “Mainstream” were written by the employee. If employee’s authorship is indicated copies of the articles should be designated as exhibits.[17]

It is clear that the FBI was conducting surveillance in the attempt to fathom Bukowski’s political commitments during this time as well as to build a dossier against him in which his “obscene” writings for the underground press would be cited as evidence. Four “exhibits” were included at the end of the FBI report: (A) an essay about Leroi Jones from *Open City*, Dec. 8–14, 1967;[18] (B) a column about a sexual encounter with a woman with red hair from *Open City*, Dec. 29–Jan. 4 1969, which is included in this volume; (C) a column from *Open City*, January 12–17 1968 collected in *Erections* as “Great Poets Die in Steaming Pots of Shit”;[19] and (D) a March, 1968 column beginning “when Henry’s mother died it wasn’t bad” from *Underground Digest*, which appeared originally in *Open City*, October 18–24, 1967, and was included in *Notes of A Dirty Old Man*.[20]

The final newspaper carrying the series (and the place where it had the longest run—February 1972–September 1976) was the *Los Angeles Free Press*. This incarnation was more artistically oriented, with a special “Dirty Old Man” logo appearing at the beginning of each installment depicting a comically mustachioed man with a bemused visage, a stubble beard, floppy hat, very large shoes, cigar in mouth, pen in hand making notes in a spiral notebook. “The Dirty Old Man” was now a recognizable brand. In addition, many of the installments were accompanied by Bukowski’s entertaining, Thurberesque drawings, placed at strategic points in the narrative. He even submitted a series of cartoons, “The Adventures of Clarence H. Sweetmeat,” which appeared in the September 19–25, 1975, and October 24–30, 1975, issues. The editor, Art Kunkin, continued the policy of *Open City* and *NOLA Express* of allowing Bukowski virtual carte blanche in terms of language, style, and subject matter.

The late sixties and early seventies were a volatile time in the gender wars. Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1970), Norman Mailer’s *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971), Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1971), and Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* (1973) (the novel on the nightstand of the travel agent ravished in one of Bukowski’s columns) were all summary statements of the sexual revolution. The racial, political, social, and military convulsions of the times are also represented in Bukowski’s prescient commentary on current events such as gas rationing, as in the January 18, 1974, column: “Americans have cheated and lied for so long, have become so decayed under the great moral Bob Hope front that I wonder why justice hasn’t arrived and all our streets and boulevards do not have Chinese names. We babies, you and I, have been saved by our atomic stockpiles, not our ingeniousness, our guts, our souls, our courage.” And in another column he considered the oil crisis: “Who could have believed that the Arabs and their near–monopoly on oil could have caused massive layoffs here?” The story about the survivor Robert Grissom—a holdout in between the two forces of Revolutionaries and Government in a post-apocalyptic America—presages the plot of a famous recent novel, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. Grissom has many characteristics in common with his creator: he listens to Mahler and Stravinsky, he is solitary, and he has gotten in trouble for his writings. This is clearly a reference to the period in 1968 when Bukowski began to be investigated by the FBI. And, in a later, 1982 incarnation of the column in *Smoke Signals*, Norman Mailer’s involvement in the Jack Abbot case is wittily observed.[21]

Bukowski chronicled the sixties and seventies counterculture in his own inimitable fashion, and in some ways considered himself to have been the first “hippie” back in the thirties and forties. Bukowski had defended the hippies from the attacks of his publisher, Jon Webb: “Why not let your hair grow and smoke a bit of grass? Relax. Take each moment as a miracle gift. I was that way before the invention of the Bomb. I was hip on the premise born before the hips—if a man is going to die, why stockpile useless human possessions?"[22] And during World War II, Bukowski was a pacifist:

> I was anti-war in a time of pro-war. I couldn't tell a good war from a bad one—I still can't. I was a hippie when there weren't any hippies; I was a beat before the beats.
>
> I was a protest march, alone.
>
> I was in some Underground like a blind mole and no other moles even existed.
>
> This is why I couldn't adjust my sights, make sense of it. I had already done it all. And when Tim Leary advised "drop out" twenty-five years after I had already dropped out, I couldn't get excited. Leary's big "drop out" was a loss of a professorship somewhere (Harvard?) I was the Underground when there wasn't any Underground.[23]

This attitude is reflected in the story recounting his irritation with his co-worker's attitude toward the counterculture, which he contrasts with his own more accepting stance. However, as we saw above, this did not mean that Bukowski was uncritical of the youth movement. As he wrote to Darlene Fife, he objected to "this juvenile hippie Romanticism which destroys papers like the *Berkeley Tribe*." Bukowski wanted perhaps a bit of *Realitätsprinzip*—a bit of German toughness and backbone to accompany all the peace and love. Like Robert Grissom, Bukowski ultimately identified with neither side of the cultural conflict, rejecting conformity with mainstream American society even as he remained skeptical of the counterculture's attempts to revolutionize it.

Notes of A Dirty Old Man also allowed Bukowski the opportunity to explore his experiences from childhood to the present and to transform them into thinly veiled autobiographical fiction. The series became a kind of extended *roman à clef* in which the events of Bukowski's life were treated in a variety of imaginative ways. For example, his traumatic childhood is portrayed in the tale concerning Petey, a 13-year-old boy with "strict parents." At the close the narrative veers into the fantastic as his abusive parents meet their deserved terrible fate. In one column, Bukowski interviews his publisher Jon Webb and discusses the art of bookmaking:

Webb and his wife Gypsy Lou published *The Outsider* magazine as well as Bukowski's *It Catches My Heart in Its Hands* (1963); in another narrative, he describes a rollicking journey by train to New Orleans to visit the Webbs in order to work on the second, lavishly produced book of his poetry, *Crucifix in a Deathhand* (1965). Yet another story, describing a trip with his daughter to the beach at Venice, packs a good deal of Bukowski's life *aetatis* 52 into a brief space: his separation from Frances Smith, the tension between the estranged couple, his love for their daughter Marina, and his struggle to preserve a balance in his own life between destruction and creativity, between hate and love. The swift narrative movement, deft dialogue, and terse descriptive style poignantly reveal the tender connection between father and daughter as adult ugliness and violence threaten the sand castle she has constructed, symbolic of the fragile innocent world of childhood.

A love triangle involving Bukowski's then-girlfriend Linda King becomes a tale of an evening watching the fights with "Patricia" at the Olympic Auditorium. And in July 1973, Bukowski went with King on a trip to Utah and got lost in the woods, which is reflected in an extended comic sequence which was later partially used in his novel *Women*, yet with significant passages omitted: for example, the lovely scene of his encounter with the brown eyes of the squirrel, which so moved him that he refrained from committing suicide. His burgeoning fame as a reader of his poetry is humorously sketched in a tale of his trip to Detroit. And we are given a portrait of the artist as an older man in "My Friend, the Gambler," which describes the preliminary stages of the creation of the film *Barfly*. Now Bukowski is sixty-five, suddenly immersed in the Hollywood whirl (which he would satirize in his 1987 novel *Hollywood*) along with the film director Barbet Schroeder ("Jean Sasoon") and Bukowski's wife Linda Lee Beighle ("Cristina").

From January 1983 to December 1984, Bukowski contributed "Notes of a Dirty Old Man" to *High Times* magazine. In addition to the long story "My Friend, the Gambler," he also composed a lively set of aphorisms entitled "Ecce Hetero." Like La Rochefoucauld, Nietzsche (the title is a play on Nietzsche's book *Ecce Homo*), and E.M. Cioran, he was especially fond of the form, examples of which are scattered throughout his work. In *Notes of A Dirty Old Man*, some of the finest are: "The difference between Art and

Life is that Art is more bearable” (a variation on Nietzsche’s “We have Art so we will not perish from Truth”); “I’d rather hear about a live American bum than a dead Greek God”; “There is nothing more boring than the truth”; “The well balanced individual is insane”; “Sexual intercourse is kicking death in the ass while singing”; “An intellectual is a man who says a simple thing in a difficult way; an artist is a man who says a difficult thing in a simple way.” Other Bukowskian wisdoms include: “The problem with women is that they are problems” and “I like dogs better than men and cats better than dogs and myself best of all, drunk in my underwear looking out the window.” Thus we see in his *High Times* column his continued affection for the form.

Notes of A Dirty Old Man—the book as well as uncollected columns—would have an impact on other artists. They would be read attentively by a young musician named Tom Waits: “I just thought this was remarkable . . . This guy’s the writer of the century and he’s being published in this kind of street rag, which seemed kind of poetic and perfect . . . and of course you felt much more like you had discovered him as well—that he wasn’t being brought to you but you had to dig and find *him*.”[24] And Raymond Carver’s biographer notes that “*Open City*, the city’s alternative paper, ran a weekly screed of stories and opinion called ‘Notes of A Dirty Old Man,’ by Charles Bukowski, then a middle-aged postal worker and little-known poet. Ray liked Southern California so well for a couple of weeks that he thought of settling there.”[25] Carver said that Bukowski had been “a kind of hero” to him.[26] Bukowski’s “new journalism” was a creative and imaginative use of all his genius as a writer to inspire and shock his readers into a new engagement with the truths of intractable reality. And more than forty years after the Dirty Old Man was born, he will surely find new fans among those hungering for alternatives to the trivia offered by what still passes for American culture today.

NOTES

[1] Aaron Krumhansl, *A Descriptive Bibliography of the Primary Publications of Charles Bukowski*. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1999, p. 41.

[2] "If I Only Could Be Asleep," in *Absence of the Hero: Uncollected Stories and Essays Vol. 2, 1946—1992*, ed. David Stephen Calonne. San Francisco: City Lights, 2010, pp. 42–43.

[3] Bukowski, "Dirty Old Man Confesses," in *Portions from a Wine-Stained Notebook*, ed. David Stephen Calonne. San Francisco: City Lights, 2008, p. 102. On the *LA Free Press*, see John McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 37–46. According to McMillian: "In 1967, one irate staffer, John Bryan, left the Freep to start a rival paper (*Open City*) after Kunkin refused to print a photograph of a disfigured napalm victim (apparently for fear of offending advertisers)," p. 239, no. 84.

[4] Bukowski had published a review of the *Artaud Anthology* in the *Los Angeles Free Press* on April 22, 1966. See *Portions*, pp. 49–53. A week before the debut of the first "Notes of a Dirty Old Man" column, Bukowski's review of A.E. Hotchner's biography of Ernest Hemingway, "An Old Drunk Who Ran Out of Luck," appeared in the May 5–11 issue of *Open City*. See *Portions*, pp. 54–56.

[5] Scott Harrison, former proprietor of the Abandoned Planet bookstore in San Francisco, kindly supplied me with information about John Bryan and *Open City*.

[6] Bukowski, "Foreword," *Notes of A Dirty Old Man*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1973, p. 6.

[7] *Ibid*. p. 6.

[8] "Bukowski on Bukowski," *Absence of the Hero*, p. 57.

[9] On the "working class" and literature, see *The Columbia Companion to the Twentieth-Century American Short Story*, ed. Blanche H. Gelfant (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Larry Smith, "The American Working-Class Short Story," pp. 81–93.

[10] See Howard Sounes, *Charles Bukowski: Locked in the Arms of a Crazy Life* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2010), p. 21; Dostoevsky was also a major influence on the Beats as well as on Henry Miller. See Maria Bloshteyn, *The Making of a Counterculture Icon: Henry Miller's Dostoevsky* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007). On Bukowski and Dostoevsky, see *Charles Bukowski: Sunlight Here I Am/Interviews & Encounters 1963–1993*, ed. David Stephen Calonne (Northville: Sundog Press, 2003), pp. 41, 74, 139, 180–81, 198, 243, 267, 269, 275.

[11] Bukowski, *Notes of A Dirty Old Man*, p. 9.

[12] *Ibid*., p. 132.

[13] Bukowski, "what have I seen," in *The Continual Condition: Poems*, ed. John Martin (New York: Ecco, 2009), p. 110.

[14] Michel Foucault, "The Repressive Hypothesis" from *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 318–19. Bukowski's work has been included in several anthologies of erotic literature. See *Fetish*: *An Anthology of Fetish Fiction*, ed. John Yau (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1998), "Love for $17.50," pp. 23–28; *Love Is Strange*, ed. Richard Glyn Jones (London: Indigo, 1998), "The Copulating Mermaid of Venice, California," pp. 143–153; *The Best American Erotic Poems: From 1800 to the Present*, ed. David Lehman (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2008), "Hunk of Rock," pp. 67–74.

[15] Darlene Fife, *Portraits from Memory: New Orleans in the Sixties* (New Orleans: Surregional Press, 2000), p. 4. On Bukowski, NOLA, and an account of the "persistent harassment" the paper experienced, see Laurence Leamer, *The Paper Revolutionaries: The Rise of the Underground Press* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), pp. 146–52.

[16] *Ibid*., p. 15. On Francisco McBride's artwork, which illustrated Bukowski's column, see p. 26. On Bukowski and New Orleans, see Jeff Weddle, *Bohemian New Orleans: The Story of* The Outsider *and Loujon Press* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007); "Writing New Orleans" by Andrei Codrescu in Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors, *A New Literary History of America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 405.

[17] *Federal Bureau of Investigation File #140-35907, 1957–1970. Henry Charles Bukowski, Jr. (a.k.a. "Charles Bukowski").*

[18] *Absence of the Hero*, pp. 59–63.

[19] Bukowski, *Tales of Ordinary Madness* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1983), pp. 77–82. The original *Erections, Ejaculations and Other Tales of Ordinary Madness* has been subsequently divided into two titles and republished as *The Most Beautiful Woman in Town* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1983), and *Tales of Ordinary Madness* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1983).

[20] *Notes of A Dirty Old Man*, "When Henry's mother died it wasn't bad," pp. 112–115.

[21] Mailer admired Bukowski's poetry, writing in a letter to Al Fogel that "he spits his words out like nails" (personal communication from Al Fogel, July 19, 2010). Hank Chinaski comments on "Victor Norman" (Mailer) in *Hollywood*: "What I liked best about him was that he had no fear of the Feminists. He was one of the last defenders of maleness and balls in the U.S. I wasn't always pleased with his literary output but I wasn't always pleased with mine either." See Bukowski, *Hollywood* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1989), p. 107. For Bukowski on Mailer, also see *Sunlight Here I Am*, pp. 54, 121, 150, 162, 224. The two men met at the Chateau Marmont in Hollywood during the making of *Barfly*. See Sounes, pp. 210–212.

[22] "Dirty Old Man Confesses," p. 101.

[23] *Ibid*., p. 92.

[24] Barry Hoskyns, *Lowside of the Road: A Life of Tom Waits* (New York: Broadway Books, 2009), p. 73. Waits's poem beginning "diamonds on my windshield, tears from heaven" appeared together with drawings by Bukowski in the magazine *The Sunset Palms Hotel*, vol. 2, Spring 1974, no. 4.

[25] Carol Sklenicka, *Raymond Carver: A Writer's Life* (New York: Scribner, 2009), pp. 168. Also see pp. 207–9, 210, 448.

[26] *Conversations with Raymond Carver*, eds. Marshall Bruce Gentry and William L. Stull (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1990), pp. 36. Also see pp. 192, 226. For Carver's poem on Bukowski, "You Don't Know What Love Is (an evening with Charles Bukowski)," see *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), pp. 57–61.

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More Notes of a Dirty Old Man—like my earlier book of Bukowski interviews, *Sunlight Here I Am: Interviews & Encounters 1963–1993*, and the two previous volumes I have edited for City Lights, *Portions from a Wine-Stained Notebook* and *Absence of the Hero*—has had a long genesis. Back in the nineties, Jamie Boran sent me an anthology of Bukowski's work that he had compiled from the *Los Angeles Free Press*. This was one of the catalysts that set in motion my fifteen-year quest for unpublished and uncollected Bukowski writings. I included a selection of the *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* columns in *Portions* and *Absence*, but it became clear to me that there remained a still unknown cornucopia of wonderful stories, essays, interviews, cartoons, poems, and aphorisms. At City Lights, Garrett Caples—who like T.S. Eliot is both poet and editor—shared my enthusiasm. He imagined this book as a sequel to the first and famous *Notes of a Dirty Old Man*, and I would like to thank him for his dedication to this project during a time when he has been working hard on his own groundbreaking edition of Philip Lamantia. I would also like to thank Julie Herrada, Head of the Labadie Collection, Special Collections at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. This is a treasure trove of anarchist literature, and I spent many happy hours in that seventh-floor room with a view. Thanks to Roger Myers of the University of Arizona Library, Special Collections and to Ed Fields, University of California at Santa Barbara, Department of Special Collections, Davidson Library. Thanks Scott Harrison, former proprietor of the Abandoned Planet bookstore in San Francisco for information about John Bryan as well as to Al Fogel for his exchange of letters with Norman Mailer. I am grateful to Roni, head of the *Charles Bukowski Gesellschaft* in Germany and editor of a splendid series of *Jahrbücher* devoted to Bukowski scholarship published by the Society. Roni, at the very last moment of the book's production, alerted me to the existence of the extremely cool photograph by Michael Montfort that graces the cover. My thanks to Daisy Montfort for granting permission. Gratitude as always for everything to Maria Beye. *Muchas gracias* to Abel Debritto—*il maestro di che sanno*—who helped with his encyclopaedic knowledge of all things

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Charles Bukowaki was born in Andernach, Germany, in 1920 and brought to California at age three. Although Bukowski spent two years at Los Angeles City College, he was largely self-educated as a writer. He spent much time in his youth in the Los Angeles Public Library, where he encountered some of the writers whose work would influence his own: Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Nietzsche, D. H. Lawrence, Céline, e. e. cummings, Pound, Fante, and Saroyan. He was a prolific poet and prose writer, publishing more than fifty volumes. City Lights has published several Bukowski titles including *Tales of Ordinary Madness, Notes of a Dirty Old Man, The Most Beautiful Woman in Town, Portions from a Wine-Stained Notebook: Uncollected Stories and Essays, 1944–1990*, and *Absence of the Hero: Uncollected Stories and Essays Vol. 2. 1946–1992* (2010). Charles Bukowski died in San Pedro, California, on March 9, 1994.

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